

## Introduction

### ***By the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues***

The United Nations is commonly seen as one of humankind's most ambitious projects, striving to attain human rights, development and peace and security for all. In many ways, the ambitious, lofty nature of its goals is both the United Nations' greatest strength and its greatest challenge. Despite unprecedented progress made during the United Nations' first sixty years, there remains a lingering frustration that the poorest of the poor, the most marginalized and discriminated against, still do not enjoy their basic human rights, development or security.

Indigenous peoples' concerns have not always been represented at the United Nations and, for the first decades of existence of the Organization, their voices were not heard there. This has slowly changed and the United Nations system has, in recent years, taken a number of steps to atone for past oversights, increasingly building partnerships with indigenous peoples.

There has been a vigorous and dynamic interface between indigenous peoples—numbering more than 370 million in some 90 countries—and the United Nations, an interface which, difficult as it is, has produced at least three results: a) a new awareness of indigenous peoples' concerns and human rights; b) recognition of indigenous peoples' invaluable contribution to humanity's cultural diversity and heritage, not least through their traditional knowledge; and c) an awareness of the need to address the issues of indigenous peoples through policies, legislation and budgets. Along with the movements for decolonization and human rights, as well as the women's and environmental movements, the indigenous movement has been one of the most active civil society interlocutors of the United Nations since 1945.

The situation of indigenous peoples in many parts of the world continues to be critical: indigenous peoples face systemic discrimination and exclusion from political and economic power; they continue to be over-represented among the poorest, the illiterate, the destitute; they are displaced by wars and environmental disasters; the weapon of rape and sexual humiliation is also turned against indigenous women for the ethnic cleansing and demoralization of indigenous communities; indigenous peoples are dispossessed of their ancestral lands and deprived of their resources for survival, both physical and cultural; they are even robbed of their very right to life. In more modern versions of market exploitation, indigenous peoples see their traditional knowledge and cultural expressions marketed and patented without their consent or participation. Of the some 7,000 languages today, it is estimated that more than 4,000 are spoken by indigenous peoples. Language specialists predict that up to 90 per cent of the world's languages are likely to become extinct or threatened with extinction by the end of the century.<sup>1</sup> This statistic illustrates the grave danger faced by indigenous peoples.

### **A brief history of indigenous issues at the international level**

For centuries, since the time of their colonization, conquest or occupation, indigenous peoples have documented histories of resistance, interface or cooperation with states, thus demonstrating their conviction and determination to survive with their distinct sovereign identities. Indeed, indigenous peoples were often recognized as sovereign peoples by states, as witnessed by the hundreds of treaties concluded between indigenous peoples and the governments of the United States, Canada, New Zealand and others. And yet as indigenous populations dwindled,

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<sup>1</sup> Language Vitality and Endangerment. UNESCO



and the settler populations grew ever more dominant, states became less and less inclined to recognize the sovereignty of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples themselves, at the same time, continued to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining their distinct identity as sovereign peoples.

In 1923, Cayuga Chief Deskaheh, the representative of the Six Nations of the Iroquois travelled to Geneva, to the League of Nations, to plead for the cause of his people. He waited a whole year to obtain recognition from the League but was not received and returned home to North America. Although he was not granted an audience by the League, he did sustain a remarkably successful PR campaign in Europe, where he found a much more receptive audience in the media and general public than he did amongst the delegations in the League.

A similar journey was made the following year by Maori religious leader W.T. Ratana to protest at the breakdown of the Treaty of Waitangi, concluded in 1840 between representatives of the British Crown and Maori chiefs in New Zealand, a treaty that gave Maori ownership of their lands. Ratana first travelled to London with a large delegation to petition King George V, but he was denied access. He then sent part of his delegation to Geneva to the League of Nations and arrived there later himself, in 1925, but was also denied access.

Indigenous issues received scant attention from the international community until the last three decades of the twentieth century. One exception was in the 1950s, when concerns about situations of forced labour among “native populations” prompted the International Labour Organization to work on what became, in 1957, Convention No. 107, entitled “Convention Concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries”. This Treaty was later criticized as assimilationist by the indigenous movement, which had become more visible at the international level in the 1970s. This would eventually lead to the adoption of ILO Convention No. 169 in 1989.

A great number of indigenous peoples’ organizations, were established at national and international level in the 1960s and 1970s, spurred on by the decolonization era and a more general growth in non-governmental organizations. The issues that fuelled the movement ranged from broken treaties and loss of land to discrimination, marginalization, conflict and gross violations of human rights, including massacres. Although most of the activities of the nascent international indigenous movement took place outside the environs of the United Nations, indigenous peoples’ voices were at last being heard, and the UN was finally willing to listen to these voices.

In 1972, the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities launched a Study on the problem of discrimination against indigenous populations, later known as “the Martínez Cobo study”, the name of the Special Rapporteur appointed to prepare the report.<sup>2</sup> The study began at a time when the international indigenous movement was growing rapidly throughout the Americas, the Caribbean, the Arctic, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Bangladesh and elsewhere. This framed the nascent international indigenous movement in human rights terms—a landmark that has characterized the movement since.

The Study created a momentum that, together with the advocacy work of the indigenous movement, led, in 1982, to the establishment of the first United Nations mechanism on indigenous peoples’ issues, namely the Working Group on Indigenous Populations of the Sub-Commission. In 1983, in an unprecedented breakthrough, the Working Group decided to allow the participation of representatives of indigenous peoples and their organizations.

Between 1984 and 1993, indigenous issues gained increased momentum, as witnessed by the establishment of the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations (1985), the adoption of ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous

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<sup>2</sup> Martínez Cobo (1986/7).

and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (1989), the proclamation of the International Year of the World's Indigenous People (1993) and, subsequently, the proclamation of two separate International Decades of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004 and 2005-2014).<sup>3</sup>

The First Decade, launched in 1994 and completed in 2004, adopted the special theme of “partnership in action” and its programme of action was meant to raise awareness about, and integrate, indigenous issues into the intergovernmental and, by extension, the governmental agendas. The First Decade helped to promote awareness and solidified indigenous issues on the agenda of the United Nations and some of its agencies. Indigenous peoples themselves also took advantage of the Decade, documenting and providing information about human rights violations and carving themselves a niche within various international fora. During the course of the First Decade a number of other achievements were made:

- ◆ August 9 was declared as the annual International Day of the World's Indigenous People
- ◆ The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people was appointed by the Commission on Human Rights
- ◆ A fellowship programme for indigenous people was established within the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR).

The other major goal of the first Decade was the establishment of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, by the Economic and Social Council in 2000. Despite these important steps forward, a number of challenges remained, most importantly the lack of implementation by states of programmes that promote the development and rights of indigenous peoples and the United Nations' role in assisting them. The other unfinished matter was the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which had not been adopted during the first Decade, despite great efforts by all sides.

In 1993, the Working Group completed a Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a document held in high esteem by indigenous peoples, created with their participation and expressing indigenous peoples' aspirations.

In 1994, the Draft Declaration was approved by the Sub-Commission and, in 1995, the Commission on Human Rights established a Working Group to examine and fine-tune the Draft Declaration. The negotiations were difficult and indigenous representatives again participated actively in the process, which eventually culminated, in June 2006, in the historic decision taken during its first session by the Human Rights Council—the body that succeeded the Commission on Human Rights—to adopt the Declaration. Just over a year later, on 13 September 2007, the General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which marked a major milestone in the work of the United Nations and indigenous peoples' struggle for the protection and promotion of their rights.<sup>4</sup>

The Working Group on indigenous populations was abolished in 2007 and replaced with the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>5</sup> The Expert Mechanism is a subsidiary body of the Human Rights Council, composed of five experts, which provides thematic expertise on the rights of indigenous peoples to the Council, focusing mainly on studies and research-based advice. The Mechanism may also suggest proposals to the Council for consideration and approval, although the mechanism does not adopt resolutions or decisions.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Organization (2004).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations General Assembly Resolution (2007).

<sup>5</sup> The Expert Mechanism on the rights of indigenous peoples.



In 2001, the Commission on Human Rights decided to establish a Special Rapporteur on the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people to examine the situation of indigenous peoples worldwide on the basis of communications received and country-specific visits. The first Special Rapporteur, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, a well-known Mexican anthropologist, presented annual reports to the Commission on Human Rights—and, since 2006—to the Human Rights Council<sup>6</sup> and the General Assembly. Mr. Stavenhagen was succeeded by the Native American law professor, Mr. S. James Anaya on 1 May 2008.

The establishment of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in 2000 came after a ten-year process of international consultation following the Vienna Conference of 1993. The Forum has a broad mandate, namely to discuss economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights and to advise the Economic and Social Council and the United Nations system on all matters pertaining to its mandate, promote the coordination and integration of indigenous issues in the United Nations system, raise awareness about indigenous issues and produce information materials on indigenous issues. This high-level body in the United Nations' hierarchy demonstrates the increasing political engagement of states in terms of cooperating with indigenous peoples to address a multiplicity of issues. More than 1,500 indigenous participants from all parts of the world attend the annual sessions of the UNPFII in New York, in addition to representatives from some 70 countries and around 35 UN agencies and inter-governmental entities.

## The concept of indigenous peoples

In the forty-year history of indigenous issues at the United Nations, and its even longer history at the ILO, considerable thinking and debate have been devoted to the question of the definition or understanding of “indigenous peoples”. But no such definition has ever been adopted by any United Nations-system body.

One of the most cited descriptions of the concept of “indigenous” was outlined in the José R. Martínez Cobo’s Study on the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations. After long consideration of the issues involved, Martínez Cobo offered a working definition of “indigenous communities, peoples and nations”. In doing so, he expressed a number of basic ideas forming the intellectual framework for this effort, including the right of indigenous peoples themselves to define what and who indigenous peoples are. The working definition reads as follows:

*Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.*

*This historical continuity may consist of the continuation, for an extended period reaching into the present of one or more of the following factors:*

- a. Occupation of ancestral lands, or at least of part of them*
- b. Common ancestry with the original occupants of these lands*

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<sup>6</sup> The Special Rapporteur’s reports may be accessed on the website of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)

- c. Culture in general, or in specific manifestations (such as religion, living under a tribal system, membership of an indigenous community, dress, means of livelihood, lifestyle, etc.)*
- d. Language (whether used as the only language, as mother-tongue, as the habitual means of communication at home or in the family, or as the main, preferred, habitual, general or normal language)*
- e. Residence in certain parts of the country, or in certain regions of the world*
- f. Other relevant factors.*

*On an individual basis, an indigenous person is one who belongs to these indigenous populations through self-identification as indigenous (group consciousness) and is recognized and accepted by these populations as one of its members (acceptance by the group).*

*This preserves for these communities the sovereign right and power to decide who belongs to them, without external interference.<sup>7</sup>*

During the many years of debate at the meetings of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, observers from indigenous organizations developed a common position that rejected the idea of a formal definition of indigenous peoples at the international level to be adopted by states. Similarly, government delegations expressed the view that it was neither desirable nor necessary to elaborate a universal definition of indigenous peoples. Finally, at its fifteenth session, in 1997, the Working Group concluded that a definition of indigenous peoples at the global level was not possible at that time, and this did not prove necessary for the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>8</sup> Instead of offering a definition, Article 33 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples underlines the importance of self-identification, that indigenous peoples themselves define their own identity as indigenous.

### *Article 33*

- 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions. This does not impair the right of indigenous individuals to obtain citizenship of the States in which they live.*
- 2. Indigenous peoples have the right to determine the structures and to select the membership of their institutions in accordance with their own procedures.*

ILO Convention No. 169 also enshrines the importance of self-identification. Article 1 indicates that self-identification as indigenous or tribal shall be regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the provisions of this Convention apply.

Furthermore, this same Article 1 contains a statement of coverage rather than a definition, indicating that the Convention applies to:

- a) tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations;*

<sup>7</sup> Martínez Cobo (1986/7), paras. 379-382.

<sup>8</sup> Working Group on Indigenous Populations (2006a) and (2006b), paras. 153-154.



*b) peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present state boundaries and who irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.*

The concept of indigenous peoples emerged from the colonial experience, whereby the aboriginal peoples of a given land were marginalized after being invaded by colonial powers, whose peoples are now dominant over the earlier occupants. These earlier definitions of indigenity make sense when looking at the Americas, Russia, the Arctic and many parts of the Pacific. However, this definition makes less sense in most parts of Asia and Africa, where the colonial powers did not displace whole populations of peoples and replace them with settlers of European descent. Domination and displacement of peoples have, of course, not been exclusively practised by white settlers and colonialists; in many parts of Africa and Asia, dominant groups have suppressed marginalized groups and it is in response to this experience that the indigenous movement in these regions has reacted.

It is sometimes argued that all Africans are indigenous to Africa and that by separating Africans into indigenous and non-indigenous groups, separate classes of citizens are being created with different rights. The same argument is made in many parts of Asia or, alternatively, that there can be no indigenous peoples within a given country since there has been no large-scale Western settler colonialism and therefore there can be no distinction between the original inhabitants and newcomers. It is certainly true that Africans are indigenous to Africa and Asians are indigenous to Asia, in the context of European colonization. Nevertheless, indigenous identity is not exclusively determined by European colonization.

The Report of the Working Group of Experts on Indigenous Populations/Communities of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights therefore emphasizes that the concept of indigenous must be understood in a wider context than only the colonial experience.

*The focus should be on more recent approaches focusing on self-definition as indigenous and distinctly different from other groups within a state; on a special attachment to and use of their traditional land whereby ancestral land and territory has a fundamental importance for their collective physical and cultural survival as peoples; on an experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination because these peoples have different cultures, ways of life or modes of production than the national hegemonic and dominant model.<sup>9</sup>*

In the sixty-year historical development of international law within the United Nations system, it is not uncommon that various terms have not been formally defined, the most vivid examples being the notions of "peoples" and "minorities". Yet the United Nations has recognized the right of peoples to self-determination and has adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. The lack of formal definition of "peoples" or "minorities" has not been crucial to the Organization's successes or failures in those domains nor to the promotion, protection or monitoring of the rights accorded to these groups. Nor have other terms, such as "the family" or "terrorism" been defined, and yet the United Nations and Member States devote considerable action and efforts to these areas.

In conclusion, in the case of the concept of "indigenous peoples", the prevailing view today is that no formal universal definition of the term is necessary, given that a single definition will inevitably be either over- or under-

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<sup>9</sup> Report of the African Commission's Working Group of Experts on Indigenous Populations/communities.

inclusive, making sense in some societies but not in others. For practical purposes, the commonly accepted understanding of the term is that provided in the Martínez Cobo study mentioned above.

## Looking forward

After decades of little or no attention from the international community, indigenous peoples are increasingly making their voices heard and building partnerships with the United Nations system and beyond. This is equally true for the national and local levels and there are countless examples of good practices whereby indigenous peoples work in cooperation with governments and local authorities in countries across the globe.

But there are still also countless examples of bad practices and, as mentioned above, the situation of indigenous peoples in many parts of the world remains extremely precarious. Some examples of this situation will be given in this volume, but it is beyond its scope to address all issues that concern indigenous peoples. It is not an attempt to provide an exhaustive or definitive analysis of indigenous issues. It is, however, an attempt to raise awareness of the most important issues and challenges that indigenous peoples face, as well as to highlight some of the possible steps that can be taken to address these challenges.

With the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2007, an important step has been taken and it is safe to say that indigenous issues have never been more prominent within the United Nations system. The Declaration has the potential to become extremely influential. This potential, however, can only be realised if indigenous peoples, states, civil society and the UN system make use of the Declaration and make it a living document that has real relevance for indigenous peoples across the world. Already, there is evidence that this will be the case. The Declaration has been adopted as national law in Bolivia and is already being referred to and used in courts of law in other countries.

## About this publication

This publication will discuss many of the issues addressed by the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It is divided into seven chapters, based on the six mandated areas of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, in addition to a chapter on emerging issues;

The first chapter, written by Joji Carino, emphasizes both self determination and the principle of free, prior and informed consent, which in practice, means that indigenous peoples themselves must be free to determine their own development. This entails that indigenous peoples' rights to their own lands and territories must be respected and that indigenous peoples need to develop their own definitions and indicators of poverty and well-being. Although global statistics on the situation of indigenous peoples are not readily available, it is clear that indigenous peoples suffer disproportionately from poverty, marginalization, lack of adequate housing and income inequality. Traditional modes of livelihood, such as fishing, hunting and gathering, livestock cultivation or small scale agriculture are under a great amount of stress from phenomena such as neo-liberalism and commodification, privatization, climate change and conflict. Many of these challenges are faced not only by indigenous peoples, but by all of humanity, and as the chapter concludes: "Indigenous peoples have vital contributions to make in addressing the contemporary challenges to renew ecological and social ethics and relationships, and in the fulfilment of peace, human rights and sustainable development."

In the second chapter, Naomi Kipuri discusses various definitions of culture, emphasising the remarkable contribution that indigenous peoples make to cultural diversity across the globe. Although it is estimated that



indigenous peoples are some 370 million, or less than 6 per cent of the global population, they speak an overwhelming majority of the world's estimated 7,000 languages, and are the stewards of some of the most biologically diverse areas accumulating an immeasurable amount of traditional knowledge about their ecosystems. Indigenous cultures face the dual and somewhat contradictory threats of discrimination and commodification. On the one hand, indigenous peoples continue to face racism and discrimination that sees them as inferior to non-indigenous communities and their culture as a hindrance to their development. On the other hand, indigenous peoples are increasingly recognized for their unique relationship with their environment, their traditional knowledge and their spirituality, leading to a commodification of their culture which is frequently out of their control, providing them no benefits, and often a great deal of harm.

The chapter on Environment, written by Neva Collings, begins by looking at the major environmental issues that indigenous peoples are facing today. The chapter emphasizes indigenous peoples' spiritual, cultural, social and economic connection with their traditional lands and their tradition of collective rights to land in contrast with dominant models of individual land ownership, privatization and development which frequently lead to dispossession of indigenous peoples' land. In addition to these threats, indigenous peoples face the consequences of rapid climate change, especially in the Arctic and the Pacific islands, while mitigation efforts have exacerbated the situation, putting increased pressure on their lands, such as deforestation for biofuel plantations. The chapter reviews some of the international legal frameworks and mechanisms for environmental protection, from the Rio Summit in 1992 to the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in 2007, and how indigenous peoples have used these mechanisms. A final section of the chapter looks at how international environmental law is being implemented, and which are the major gaps and challenges indigenous peoples have to confront at the local and national levels.

The Education chapter by Duane Champagne illustrates the stark contrast in access to education between indigenous and non-indigenous students. At all levels, and in all regions of the world, indigenous peoples tend to have lower levels of literacy, enjoy fewer years at school and are more likely to drop out of school. Education is seldom provided to indigenous children in their native languages and it is frequently offered in a context that is culturally inappropriate and has few and inadequate facilities. Far too often, those who do get an education are forced to assimilate within the dominant culture, unable to find jobs in their communities. Despite discouraging overall trends, there are a great number of initiatives that point the way forward for indigenous education, where the community as a whole is involved, where teachers speak both the dominant language and the relevant indigenous language, where ultimately indigenous peoples have the freedom to choose whether they pursue their careers in their own communities or elsewhere.

The Health chapter, written by Myrna Cunningham<sup>10</sup> emphasizes the interdependence between health and other factors, such as poverty, illiteracy, marginalization, environmental degradation and (the lack of) self determination. These forces, inherited from colonization, make indigenous peoples in general, and indigenous women and children in particular, vulnerable to poor health. The result is that indigenous peoples experience disproportionately high levels of maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition, cardiovascular illnesses, HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, diabetes, and in virtually all other indicators of poor health, including mental health. Indigenous peoples have poor access to state health systems while there is a palpable lack of recognition and support for indigenous peoples' own health systems. Any successful plan to provide health care for indigenous peoples must involve intercultural health system where Western and indigenous health systems are practiced with equal human, technological and financial resources and where indigenous peoples are involved in all decision making processes involving their health and health care provisions.

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<sup>10</sup> Written in collaboration with the Center for Indigenous Peoples' Autonomy and Development (CADPI) in Nicaragua.

In the Human Rights chapter, Dalee Sambo Dorrough stresses the indivisibility and interrelatedness of indigenous peoples' rights and how their human rights are intrinsically related to their right to self-determination, self-determination being indeed a pre-condition to the exercise of all other rights. From the Universal Declaration on Human Rights to the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, there are a significant number of international instruments that protect the human rights of indigenous peoples, and there have been marked improvements in recent years. However, indigenous peoples continue to face grave human rights abuses on a daily basis, from dispossession of land to violence and murder. Often the most serious of these abuses are committed against indigenous persons who are defending their rights and their lands and territories. There is therefore a serious gap between indigenous peoples' internationally recognized human rights and their enjoyment of those rights in reality which needs to be addressed through human rights education, more effective oversight and greater commitments from states.

The last chapter of this publication, written by Mililani Trask, looks at some of the emerging issues affecting indigenous peoples, including violence and militarism, effects of conservation, globalization, migration and urbanization, and indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation. These issues are in many ways interrelated and a common theme is indigenous peoples' vulnerability in the face of outside pressures and the need to develop specific policies that address this vulnerability, while simultaneously ensuring that the principle of free, prior and informed consent is respected and that indigenous peoples participate in decision making processes that affect their well-being. This is indeed the underlying theme of this publication.



## Overview of main international responses

- 1957 - ILO Convention 107 on Indigenous and Tribal Populations is adopted (<http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/convdisp1.htm>)
- 1972 - The Study of the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations (also known as the Martínez Cobo study) – is launched
- 1982 - The Working Group on Indigenous Populations is established by the UN (<http://www.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/groups/groups-01.htm>)
- 1984 - The Martínez Cobo Study is submitted to the UN 1985 - The Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations is created
- 1989 - ILO Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent States (<http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/convdisp1.htm>) is adopted
- 1992 - The Rio Earth Summit adopts the Convention on Biological Diversity (<http://www.biodiv.org/convention/default.shtml>)
- 1993 - The World Conference on Human Rights recommends the establishment of a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
- 1993 - International Year of the World's Indigenous People
- 1994 - The first International Decade for Indigenous People is launched (1994-2004)
- 1994 - The Voluntary Fund to support small-scale projects during the Decade is created
- 1998 - First Roundtable on Intellectual Property and Indigenous Peoples organized by the World Intellectual Property Organization - WIPO (<http://www.wipo.int>)
- 2000 - Establishment of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) (<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/index>)
- 2001 - The mechanism of a Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People is established by the Commission on Human Rights (<http://www.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/rapporteur/>)
- 2002 - A Voluntary Fund for Indigenous and Local Communities is established by the CBD (<http://www.cbd.int>)
- 2003 - A Voluntary Fund is established by the UN to support the Permanent Forum
- 2005 - The Second International Decade for Indigenous People is launched (2005-2015), including a fund to support small-scale projects
- 2005 - A Voluntary Fund for Indigenous and Local Communities is created by WIPO
- 2007 - The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is adopted by the UN General Assembly (<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.html>)
- 2007 - The new Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is established by the Human Rights Council

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