



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES INDIGENOUS VOICES

## BACKGROUND

### Indigenous Peoples in the African region

#### Twelfth Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Discussion on Thursday, 23 May 2013, 3 – 6 p.m.

The number of indigenous people in Africa is estimated to be around 50 million.<sup>1</sup> Most indigenous peoples are nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists and hunter-gatherers. Many of them are faced with multiple challenges, including the dispossession of their lands, territories and resources, forced assimilation into the way of life of the dominant groups, marginalization, poverty and illiteracy.

The challenge to recognize indigenous peoples in national laws and constitutions continues. But there have been some major achievements: the Republic of Congo in 2011 became the first African country to adopt a specific law on the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous populations. The Central African Republic in 2010 – as the first country in Africa – ratified ILO Convention No. 169, which deals specifically with the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. Kenya's constitution recognizes historically marginalized groups, including indigenous peoples. The constitution of Cameroon also mentions indigenous peoples, and in Burundi the constitution provides for special representation of the indigenous Batwa people in the National Assembly and the Senate.

At the regional level, the inclusion of “peoples' rights” in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights serves as a basis for coverage of indigenous peoples under the Charter. A groundbreaking report issued in 2003 by the Working Group on Indigenous Populations/Communities of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights provides an analysis of the situation of indigenous peoples in Africa and is a cornerstone for the conceptualization of indigenous peoples in the African region.

#### Education and health

A major challenge for indigenous peoples in Africa is access to education. The education gap between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples remains critical. Primary school enrollment rates for indigenous children generally are much lower than the national average. In Cameroon, for example, only 1.31 per cent of the indigenous Baka children in the district of

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<sup>1</sup> See the International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs, at <http://www.iwgia.org/regions/africa>



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Salapoumbé attended primary school in 2006.<sup>2</sup> Poor health and social status of indigenous peoples are another issue. A recent study conducted by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in the Republic of Congo reports that 41.9 per cent of Batwa women giving birth at home are likely to die, compared to 33 per cent of women from the dominant Bantu ethnic group. Similarly, the infant mortality rate for home births is estimated to be around 48.8 per cent for the Batwa people, compared to 35 per cent in the Bantu population.<sup>3</sup> This is due to remoteness, poverty and discrimination for being indigenous.

### **Conflicts and environmental pressures**

Armed conflicts also put multiple pressures on indigenous peoples in Africa – from the Maasai in Kenya and the Tuareg in Mali to the Baka of the Central African Republic.

In addition, indigenous peoples' territories are often exploited for mining, logging and other extractive industries, threatening the livelihoods of pastoral, semi-nomadic, hunter-gatherers and forest peoples. Logging activities in the Congo Basin, oil extraction in the Niger Delta and the discovery of oil in East Africa, for instance, are threatening the traditional use of indigenous lands and natural resources.

### **Contributions by indigenous peoples**

Africa's indigenous peoples can make major contributions to their countries. Their traditional knowledge and the effective use and preservation of their lands and natural resources can inspire worldwide measures for conservation and mitigation, particularly in the face of climate change. Traditional medicines and practices can be shared for the benefit of the wider society.

The Permanent Forum is expected to adopt recommendations at the conclusion of the discussion, addressing the main issues, challenges and positive measures of cooperation to improve the situation of indigenous peoples in Africa.

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

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations (2010), *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples*, pg. 133.

<sup>3</sup> UNFPA, *Etude des déterminants de l'utilisation des services de santé de la reproduction par les peuples autochtones en République du Congo*, Février 2013, pp. 77 and 79.

