



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, INDIGENOUS VOICES

BACKGROUND

What is at stake at the fifth session?

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Free Prior and Informed Consent—*the right to participate in decisions*

What happens when roads are built through traditional indigenous land? Or when a massive dam is planned which will destroy homes and force the community to move?

Often, development can be a double-edged sword for indigenous peoples. Many of them are very poor and not the ones who initiate large-scale development initiatives like construction of roads, oil pipelines, mining, hydro-power dams or gas development. They are often mere bystanders or powerless participants at the negotiating table, even though their children and they inherit the ecological costs of these projects.

The consensus in indigenous communities is the establishment of a system that ensures the full and effective participation and the free, prior and informed consent of the communities concerned. This principle gives indigenous societies a formal role and veto power in the negotiations. It secures their rights to take part in decisions that affect them. At the working level, this system facilitates a chance to demand compensation for environmental damages, on-going profits from commercial projects, or negotiate that part profits are invested into the community.


The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) has been building consensus and advocating for the implementation of this principle for several years.

Indigenous traditional knowledge and culture—*preserving the past for the future*

How does ancient cultures and knowledge fit into our modern societies? Estimates point to more than 5000 languages and cultures within the indigenous communities. However, today many of these people live on the fringes of society and are deprived of cultural rights. Years of marginalization and forced assimilation has resulted in the risk of indigenous cultures dying out.

UNPFII prioritizes the preservation of indigenous cultures. Ongoing efforts include activities to promote and support the recovery of indigenous heritage, oral traditions and ancient writings of indigenous peoples, recognizing them as heritage materials. The UN recommends that governments should develop focused programmes that reverse ethnocentric perceptions of non-indigenous peoples of indigenous cultures, which are often stereotyped, folklorized and biased.





The role of indigenous individuals, particularly women and young people, in the transmission and safeguarding of knowledge linked to their cultural and natural heritage is of utmost importance. As guarantors of cultural diversity, young indigenous people should be made to feel proud of their identity and their culture, while taking their place in a globalized world.

Collection and disaggregation of data—*why numbers matter*

What does it mean to be invisible? To not be heard, seen or counted because of a lack of presence in official census?

In most countries, there are no available separate— or disaggregated— data that accurately reflects the situation of indigenous peoples as compared to other population groups. In turn, there are no scientific numbers that can be used to advocate for better programmes for them or even monitor the impact of existing programmes. Experts say in order to gain a real understanding of the indigenous situation, reports need to go beyond national averages for these can mask disparities related to ethnicity.

For example, in many countries the health situation of indigenous communities is rapidly deteriorating due to increasing poverty, brought in by loss of land, displacement and food insecurity. However, poverty statistics in most countries and even in international bodies are not disaggregated for indigenous peoples. Thus a clear picture of the poverty situation or its health implications on these societies is missing. In turn the true realities of indigenous peoples— even in the progress of the Millennium Development Goals — are likely understated.

UNPFII has been urging governments for the participation of indigenous peoples as equal partners in all stages of data collection. Governments need to allocate resources, build national capacities and provide appropriate training and employment for indigenous individuals in data collection.

Education—*what lack of education means*

What happens when rivers and forests come in the way of education? For indigenous peoples access to basic social services such as education, health, water and sanitation is often a struggle.

Geographical isolation of many small rural or nomadic communities makes it difficult to provide them with educational services. It is hard for children to travel long distances on foot, without transport and under difficult environmental conditions. Schools routinely lack teachers, electricity, drinking water and sanitary arrangements.

Discrimination against indigenous children especially if they study alongside non-indigenous children in urban communities is common. Due to a lack of full competency in the language of instruction, they are often ignored in class. Discrimination in education is most prevalent in the tendency to use school as a method to assimilate indigenous peoples into the cultural model of the dominant society.

UNPFII has been advocating for the basic right to education for indigenous peoples. Among its many recommendations is the need to increase awareness of integrating indigenous learning systems, culture and knowledge in formal and informal education for them. Mother tongue and bilingual education at the primary and secondary level need to be made available for indigenous societies and a key to their success is the need to remain sensitive to indigenous holistic world views, languages and traditional knowledge.

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