



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES INDIGENOUS VOICES

BACKGROUNDER

Urban Indigenous Peoples and Migration: Challenges and Opportunities

The issue of urban indigenous peoples and migration will be the focus of a half-day discussion on 21 May as part of the Sixth Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, to be held at UN Headquarters in New York from 14 – 25 May.

While the majority of indigenous peoples worldwide still live in rural areas, they are increasingly migrating to urban areas, both voluntarily and involuntarily. This is a reflection of the growing trend of global urbanization, whereby the majority of the world's population will soon live in cities.

Factors that contribute to indigenous peoples' urban migration include land dispossession, poverty, militarization, natural disasters, lack of employment opportunities, the deterioration of traditional livelihoods combined with the lack of viable economic alternatives, and the prospect of better opportunities in cities.

Challenges

Indigenous peoples worldwide are vulnerable to a range of social and economic factors that affect their human rights. They tend to lack access to education, to live on lands that are vulnerable to natural disasters, with inadequate or no sanitation and poor access if any, to health services; all of which contribute to lower productivity and incomes among indigenous populations. At the same time, their limited political power means that they are unable to use the political system to improve their position.

Indigenous peoples that migrate to urban areas face particular and often additional challenges, most prominently unemployment, limited access to services and inadequate housing. In addition, indigenous peoples in urban areas may experience discrimination and have difficulties in sustaining their language, identity and culture and educating future generations which can result in a loss of indigenous heritage and values.

"Removed from our land we are literally removed from ourselves."

Mick Dodson, Australian indigenous leader and Member of the Permanent Forum

Many young indigenous people find themselves in a "no man's land" between the urban societies that do not fully accept them and their indigenous communities that often fail to offer them the opportunities they need and desire.

"The forced displacement of many indigenous communities by development projects is resulting in extreme impoverishment and contributing to urban drift. In the cities, indigenous peoples suffer major disparities in all measurable areas such as lower wages, lack of employment, skills and education; poor health, housing and criminal convictions. They live in poor human settlements outside the support of traditional community and culture."ⁱ



United Nations



Opportunities

However, migration can also be a positive experience, providing more and better opportunities for indigenous peoples in the area of employment and education, with income generated by urban indigenous peoples often used to support families in their communities of origin.

In some instances, indigenous peoples have been able to adapt and improve their situations, preserving their indigenous identities while maximizing the benefits of urban society. Using the term “edgewalkers” to describe such youth in the Pacific region, one indigenous author explained:

“[Edgewalkers] are part of a generation of Pacific peoples who have mastered skills that have enabled them to adopt situational identities that allow them to weave between traditional indigenous contexts and the technological and information worlds”.ⁱⁱ

Country examples

In **Mexico**, where the indigenous population was estimated at 12.4 million in 2000 (12 per cent of the total population), almost one in every three indigenous people lives in a city.

* Illiteracy rates among the urban indigenous population are four times higher than non-indigenous city-dwellers.

* Indigenous people living in cities have been found to drop out of school to seek employment earlier than their non-indigenous counterparts. This leads to a pattern of working in poorly paid, low-skilled jobs, with 50 per cent of the indigenous population earning an income of between \$150- 300 per month.

* Urban indigenous generally live in lower quality housing, with more than one-third of indigenous homes in Mexico City having only one room and a higher proportion of indigenous homes incorporating asbestos sheeting (16.1 per cent compared with 9 per cent of non-indigenous housing).ⁱⁱⁱ

In **The Philippines**, indigenous peoples typically migrate to cities as a result of a loss of livelihood, lack of social services or due to tribal conflicts. Due to their limited skills and education, they often face unemployment and poverty. For example, in the northern Philippine city of Baguio (where over 60 per cent of the population is made up of indigenous peoples from the Cordillera region), it is estimated that some 65 per cent of indigenous migrants suffer from extreme poverty.^{iv}

In Africa, forced migration to urban areas has often resulted from land loss due to the creation of wildlife reserves and the construction of dams, mining projects or other development projects.

In **Tanzania**, 90 per cent of Masaai men who have migrated to the capital city, Dar es Salaam, end up working as security guards, earning around \$40 per month and are often only able to afford to live in slums on the outskirts of the city.^v

In **India**, where it is estimated that indigenous peoples (called “Scheduled Tribes”) make up 8.2 per cent of the total population, indigenous migration to cities has been involuntary as well as, increasingly, voluntary (for better education opportunities for example). Negative impacts of urban migration on indigenous peoples in India have included cultural erosion, loss of language, exploitation and discrimination.^{vi}

In **Canada**, it is estimated that more than 50 per cent of the indigenous population now live in cities^{vii} with reasons given for their migration including family and housing, as well as education (for those migrating from reserves) and employment (for those migrating between cities). There is a high level of mobility among the Aboriginal population from city to city and between cities and reserves, which can have a disruptive effect on the provision of social programs such as health, education and family support.^{viii}





Recommendations

A recent UN meeting on the subject of urban indigenous peoples and migration highlighted the importance of *culturally-specific* policy development in the areas of healthcare, housing, education and employment, to ensure that benefits from progress in these areas are equally enjoyed by indigenous peoples.

“It is not enough that indigenous children attend school, it is necessary that the school be culturally and symbolically significant and that it integrates diversity instead of reproducing racism and discrimination.”^{ix}

The International Expert Group Meeting, held in Santiago de Chile in late March, also emphasized the need for relevant authorities to understand the multiple identities of indigenous peoples within urban areas and their continuing relationship to their traditional lands, natural resources and environments in rural areas. In this sense, indigenous peoples should not be seen as divided between urban and rural, but rather as peoples with rights and a common cultural identity adapting to changing circumstances and environments.

It was also recognized that the impacts of urban areas on indigenous peoples could vary greatly. Some are able to adapt and improve their situations considerably without loss of cultural identity; in other cases, indigenous peoples are subject to discrimination, exclusion, violence, etc. The meeting concluded that urbanization is a phenomenon that requires immediate attention and States have obligations to ensure that indigenous peoples are not forcibly removed or driven from their homelands, nor subject to discrimination once in urban areas.

For more information on the Sixth Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, please see:
http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/session_sixth.html

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ⁱ Joji Cariño, “Indigenous Peoples, Human Rights And Poverty”, *Indigenous Perspectives*, Volume 7, Number 1, April 2005

ⁱⁱ Anne-Marie Tupuola, “Pasifika Edgewalkers: Urban Migration, Resilience and Indigenous Trans-cultural Identities”, Expert Group Meeting on Urban Indigenous Peoples and Migration, 27-29 March 2007

ⁱⁱⁱ Pablo Yanes, “Equality in Diversity: Agenda for the Urban Indigenous Peoples in Mexico”, Expert Group Meeting on Urban Indigenous Peoples and Migration, 27-29 March 2007

^{iv} Geraldine Cacho and Joan Carling, “The Situation of Poor Indigenous Peoples in Baguio City -the Philippines”, *Indigenous Affairs*, 4-4/02, IWGIA





^v Johnson ole Kaunga, “The living and Owrking Conditions of Urban-based indigenous Peoples: The Case of the Maasai of Tanzania”, *Indigenous Affairs*, 4-4/02, IWGIA

^{vi} Khetoho Enatoli Sema, “Indigenous Peoples in India: Struggle for Identity, Equality and Economic Progress”, Expert Group Meeting on Urban Indigenous Peoples and Migration, 27-29 March 2007

^{vii} Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, Mission to Canada, 2 December 2004 (E/CN.2/2005/88/Add.3)

^{viii} Stewart Clatworthy and Mary Jane Norris, “Aboriginal Mobility and Migration in Canada: Trends, Recent Patterns and Implications, 1971 – 2001, Expert Group Meeting on Urban Indigenous Peoples and Migration, 27-29 March 2007

^{ix} Pablo Yanes, “Equality in Diversity: Agenda for the Urban Indigenous Peoples in Mexico”, Expert Group Meeting on Urban Indigenous Peoples and Migration, 27-29 March 2007

