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Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Fourth Session
5th Meeting (AM)

PERMANENT FORUM CONSIDERS LINKS BETWEEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, MILLENNIUM GOALS, FORESTS, NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The linkage of issues related to forests and indigenous peoples was among matters discussed this morning, as the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues continued its session with a discussion of how to achieve the Millennium Development Goals among indigenous people with a focus on good practices and barriers to implementing actions combating poverty.

The Forum on Forests is meeting in a simultaneous two week session from 16 to 27 May with the Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Addressing the Indigenous Forum today, the Forest Forum Chairman, Manuel Rodriguez-Becerra, stressed the link between the Millennium Goals, indigenous people and forests. He said both Forums were concerned with the deterioration of the ecosystem. Governments that recognized ancestral rights and forestry rights were creating new opportunities to improve indigenous livelihoods and reduce poverty. The main challenge before both Forums was to implement the many good ideas presented.

Venezuela's representative stressed the need to design development programmes to ensure fair and broad participation in benefits. Also, diagnostic tools and strategies must be included to make sure poverty was reduced according to traditional measures and indigenous definitions.

Speakers representing indigenous groups, including the Arctic Caucus and the South Asia Indigenous Women Forum, stressed that poverty was promoted rather than reduced by deterioration of the ecosystems in their regions and by global climate change. They urged the Forum to intervene by taking action to stop the damage and ensure that respect for indigenous people's rights was part of initiatives to address the challenges. They also called for developing indicators that measured progress.

Denmark's representative said her country and Norway had prepared a tool kit on addressing indigenous issues. It contained indicators that went far beyond economics to measure indigenous concerns and priorities. Its focus was on human rights and decentralization to achieve indigenous-sensitive implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

The representatives of Indonesia, Viet Nam and Mexico also spoke this morning.

Speaking on behalf of agencies and intergovernmental organizations were the representatives of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment.

Additionally speaking on behalf of indigenous groups were representatives of the International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests/Nepal Tamang Ghedung; Caucus de los Pueblos Indígenas del Ecuador/Instituto para el Desarrollo Social y de las Investigaciones Científicas/Fundación Hanns Seidel; Maya Vision/American Indian Law Alliance; Pacific Caucus; Caucus de Mujeres Indígenas; People's Caucus; Indian Treaty Council/The Confederacy of Treaty of Six First and Frente por la Democracia y el Desarrollo Coalición Campesina Indígena del Istmo; and Consejo de Pueblos Nahuas Del Alto Balsas Guerrero.

Established in 2002, the Forum on Indigenous Issues meets once a year for 10 days to raise awareness of issues concerning indigenous peoples and to promote activities related to them. The Forum consists of 16 members, eight nominated by indigenous groups and eight by States. The Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People was inaugurated in January 2005.

The next formal meeting of the Forum will take place at 10 a.m. tomorrow, Thursday, 19 May, when discussion will continue on indigenous peoples and the Millennium Development Goals with the emphasis turning to the achievement of universal primary education.

Background

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues met today to continue discussion of eradicating poverty and hunger under the thematic approach of "combating poverty: good practices and barriers to implementation". (For background information, see Press Release HR/4836 of 13 May.)

Discussion

PHRANG ROY, Assistant President of the External Affairs Division of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), said sustainable agriculture and natural resource management played a key role in the lives of poor persons. Recognizing that indigenous people were among the most vulnerable and marginalized of the poor, IFAD had approved \$120 million to \$150 million over the past few years for their support. Among other activities, it had been assisting them to secure access to their ancestral lands, build up their capacity, revitalize traditional knowledge systems and promote indigenous cultural awareness. The IFAD had also worked to enhance indigenous dignity and self-esteem, strengthen indigenous institutions, build coalitions of indigenous people, and support the involvement of indigenous women as peace brokers.

Despite accomplishments made thus far, however, more strategic interventions and advocacy were needed to put indigenous concerns before decision-makers at all levels, he said. Moreover, the Millennium Goals had yet to reflect the needs of indigenous people, and few poverty reduction strategy papers included them to a significant extent.

WALTER REID, of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, said the Millennium Assessment, which had taken place over the past four years, had looked at the consequences of ecosystem change for human well-being. It had been authorized through governments, but its multi-stakeholder board also included businesses, non-governmental organizations and indigenous peoples.

He said the Assessment had found that changes to the planet over the past 50 years had been unprecedented. A significant amount of land had been converted for crops; 20 per cent of the world's coral reefs had been lost; and flows of biologically available nitrogen had doubled in the last 40 years, leading to vast dead zones in coastal regions. Such changes had provided significant benefits, since they had increased the supply of food and water in certain areas, but they also had the potential to substantially decrease needed resources in the future unless they were addressed.

Ecosystem degradation, was increasing the risk of abrupt changes, the emergence of diseases, fisheries collapse and regional climate change, and could exacerbate poverty, he added. Such degradation

could grow significantly worse over the next 50 years, and become a major barrier to achievement of the Millennium Goals, especially Goal 1, to reduce poverty. It was possible to reverse degradation in many ecosystems over the next 50 years, although investments would be substantial.

Responses to Forum Questions

An indigenous person himself from India, IFAD's representative said his group's approach was based on the fact that the indigenous perspective on the ecosystem was different from the mainstream worldview and that the view of that system among indigenous groups worldwide was highly varied. In some cases, the challenge to be managed focused on issues related to land having been taken from the group. Other situations involved groups being displaced from areas related to ancestral roots.

The condition of exclusion was a key concern to indigenous groups everywhere, he said. They wanted a voice in decisions about their ecosystem. They wanted access to the means of building institutions and the power to stop corruption around them. The self-help movement had been very successful in fighting poverty, and the role of women was particularly evident there. Indicators had helped build the tools to fight poverty, including the political poverty of marginalization all the way up to the national level. The Forum played an important role in advancing the self-help movement by enabling indigenous peoples to have a network for self-help in the most challenging areas of health, political access and empowerment.

The Millennium Assessment representative said global climate change would be the number one driver in global concerns by the end of the century. An upward change of up to two degrees in the global environmental temperature would have both harmful and beneficial effects for ecosystems the world over. However, a change of more than two degrees would harmfully impact ecosystems the world over.

Discussion

The representative of Venezuela said that development for the well-being of all must be designed so that it led to fair and broad participation in the benefits it could provide. It must also include diagnoses and strategies to reduce poverty according to traditional measures (such as dollars earned per day), as well as indigenous definitions applying to their communities. Such development should lead to an equitable distribution of income and policies to ensure the population's well-being.

She noted that indigenous peoples had been included in Venezuela's constitution, which recognized the multi-ethnic nature of its society and laid emphasis on their social rights, traditional medicinal practices, health needs, and right to participate in the national economy as workers. The country had also changed its legislation to strengthen indigenous rights and had introduced a social policy aimed at promoting respect for traditional sectors that had been excluded, particularly indigenous peoples.

The representative of the International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests said indigenous peoples had been the main victims suffering in the name of development and democracy, often lacking even minimum human rights. While development for some meant diverse and overall development, it meant a minimum of human rights, participation in decision-making, self-governance and self-determination for indigenous peoples.

He noted that some developing countries were preparing poverty reduction strategy papers without indigenous participation, failing to recognize their rights. Indigenous peoples should have full participation in drafting and implementing such strategies. Moreover, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Economic and Social Council, and General Assembly should adopt the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples to secure basic indigenous rights and foster development among such groups. All governments should enact legislation recognizing indigenous rights, and include them in decision-making processes.

Indonesia's delegate said his country was made up of 500 ethnic groups with their own languages and dialects, living on 7,508 islands. Indonesia had drawn up a new national strategy to eradicate poverty, which was rights-based, people-centred and pro-poor. The strategy had led to a steady decrease in people living below the poverty line, and had been successful in eradicating extreme poverty according to Millennium Goal 1. In addition, the Government had begun a decentralization process, which allowed rural and indigenous peoples to empower and develop their own communities. The Government had allocated considerable decision-making to local governments and transferred substantial investments for local management.

MANUEL RODRIGUEZ-BECERRA, Chairman of the United Nations Forum on Forests, noted that his Forum had been created by ECOSOC in 2000, had universal membership, and heard from several civil society organizations, as well as nine major groups, of which indigenous peoples were one. The Forum focused on the management and sustainable development of forests, and strengthening political commitment to that end.

Stressing the strong link between the Millennium Goals, indigenous people and forests, he said governments worldwide were beginning to recognize ancestral domains and forestry rights. Many were creating new opportunities for community management, which would dramatically improve indigenous livelihoods and contribute to poverty reduction. When indigenous peoples were removed from their native lands, their ability to maintain and pass on traditional knowledge was in danger of being lost. This year's Forum had great expectations that agreements would be made on political commitments to combat deforestation and degradation.

Response to Questions

In response to questions, the Chairman of the Forest Forum said the lack of greater progress in his area was international hypocrisy. The symptoms were being cured but the causes of forest deterioration weren't being reached because there were two causes: poverty and wealth. Inequity in the world's wealth had caused the deterioration in the forests to the point where 90 per cent of the natural forests were concentrated in only 24 countries and 70 countries had no forests at all because of poor forest and soil management. The wealthy exploited the forests in the environments of the poor and the poor had no power to protect them. His forum had made over 200 recommendations on how to reverse the vicious cycle related to attitudes that harmed the forest ecosystem, such as consumerism. The response to questionnaires on implementing those recommendations had been disappointing.

Discussion

A representative of the Caucus de los Pueblos Indígenas del Ecuador/Instituto para el Desarrollo Social y de las Investigaciones Científicas/Fundación Hanns Seidel said the key to eradicating poverty among indigenous peoples was to build the infrastructure to empower them and to maximize the use of indigenous groups' specific talents. The Forum was the opportune arena in which to showcase the wide-ranging specialties of indigenous expertise across the world and coordinate actions to promote them.

Denmark's representative said the main challenge with regard to indigenous issues was to implement new norms. The Forum was now firmly established and the discussion of the past two days had already shown its effectiveness. Her country and Norway had struck up a partnership at the Johannesburg conference to prepare a package of draft best practices on protecting the indigenous heritage. The tool kit was available at the Forum and focused on general principles for sector programme support for two cross-cutting issues: human rights and decentralization. It also looked at four sectors related to the Millennium Goals: education, health, transport and agriculture. Monitoring indicators included in the kit went far beyond economics to measure concerns and priorities to achieve indigenous-sensitive implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

Speaking for the Arctic Caucus, a delegate said some progress had been made in reversing deterioration of the ecosystem in his region. For example, reindeer herders were moving herds back to native lands in some areas. Challenges remained, however, including the harmful actions of logging groups and deterioration due to global climate change. The Forum must intervene in those areas to stop the damage which was causing poverty. Respect for people's rights must be part of initiatives to address the challenges, and indicators must be developed to measure progress.

Viet Nam's representative outlined his country's successful poverty-reduction programmes in the ethnically diverse areas of his country. He said his country's record in reducing poverty was due to nationally targeted programmes aimed at specific goals including eradicating poverty. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had been involved in implementing some measures, and steps were also being developed to prevent re-impoverishment through action such as energy-reallocation and employment incentives aimed at ethnic minorities and marginalized groups. Any contention that his country's economic progress was made at the expense of its people was false.

The representative of the Maya Vision/American Indian Law Alliance said the destruction of the Mayan ecosystem was the main cause of economic deprivation and hunger among the Mayan people. He recommended that the Forum: reaffirm the principle of free, prior and informed consent (on projects that could affect the lands of indigenous people) as the inalienable right of indigenous peoples in implementation of the Millennium Goals; recommend that a comprehensive study be carried out on projects affecting the social and economic rights of indigenous peoples; and support the protection of indigenous rights with respect to free trade agreements, which affected their ecosystems.

The representative of Mexico emphasized that the disregarded rights of indigenous people required the attention of all States. Over the past few years, some progress had been made to improve their condition, but many still suffered from extreme poverty. Stressing that globalization and development should strengthen cultural diversity, rather than lead to increased exclusion and discrimination, he said that the recognition and practice of multiculturalism was a prerequisite for the full development of societies.

A representative of the Pacific Caucus said that a Pacific plan drawn up by the Pacific Consultations Workshop should be placed in moratorium until more comprehensive and inclusive dialogue could be held to assure that it had the free, prior, and informed consent of the Pacific indigenous peoples. Moreover, indigenous Pacific nations had been excluded from a recent Pacific Consultations initiative that would affect their territorial waters, development and food security. He called for immediate consultations to integrate Pacific peoples into discussions and forums concerning them.

Speaking for the Caucus de Mujeres Indígenas, its representative said the United Nations must respect indigenous vision and establish an alliance with indigenous people. In addition, it must submit disaggregated information on the Millennium Goals. She recommended: that United Nations agencies prevent external agents from destroying land without free, prior and informed consent; primary education for all in their native, as well as national, languages; and that all primary schools be multicultural. In addition, sustainable development projects must consider indigenous peoples at all levels.

A representative of the People's Caucus said hunger and poverty were due to the loss and pillaging of indigenous lands and resources, which were an integral means of their livelihood, as well as to the loss of their close spiritual and material relationship with Mother Earth. Indigenous peoples measured a people's progress with a different yardstick than economic, financial or market success. People believed that development meant generating dollars, and failed to base it on a human-rights approach. He described a six-page set of recommendations that would be submitted on behalf of his group to various United Nations agencies.

A representative of the Asian Indigenous Tribal People's Network said hunger was brought on by war, drought and institutionalized discrimination. Lamenting that indigenous peoples were not referred to in the Millennium Goals, he questioned whether a single member of the Forum had been invited by the

UNDP to assist with Millennium programmes. Unless the United Nations was more inclusive, nothing would ever be realized at the country level.

Speaking for the Indian Treaty Council/the Confederacy of Treaty of Six First/Frente por la Democracia y el Desarrollo Coalición Campesina Indigna del Istmo, a representative listed several activities that had negatively affected the lives of indigenous peoples. Those included the extension of intellectual property networks that had increased biopiracy; the imposition of unsustainable projects by governments and private companies without the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples, and without considering their rights and values; militarization and oppression in indigenous territories; and national policies imposing inadequate exclusionary practices. She urged the Forum to participate in future discussions and collective efforts in the United Nations system that were aimed at identifying future policies and initiatives.

A representative of the South Asia Indigenous Women Forum said practices in her region were promoting poverty rather than fighting it. Armed conflict was also harming the most vulnerable groups, including women and children, and was resulting in disadvantaged women-headed households. The Forum must make sure that the Millennium Development Goals addressed the specific needs of indigenous people, including by recognizing their rights to access and including their views in poverty reduction programmes. Sufficient resources must also be made available to fund actions.

A collective statement on behalf of six indigenous groups in the Americas was delivered by the representative of the Mexican-based Consejo de Pueblos Nahuas Del Alto Balsas Guerrero. He said the Forum should ensure the Economic and Social Council made sufficient funds available to implement programmes to combat the extreme poverty that was rampant in indigenous communities due to the plunder and ravaging committed against the environment. Transparency and easy access should be guaranteed.

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