

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, INDIGENOUS VOICES




United Nations

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Some members of the
Permanent Forum during its
first session, in May 2002.

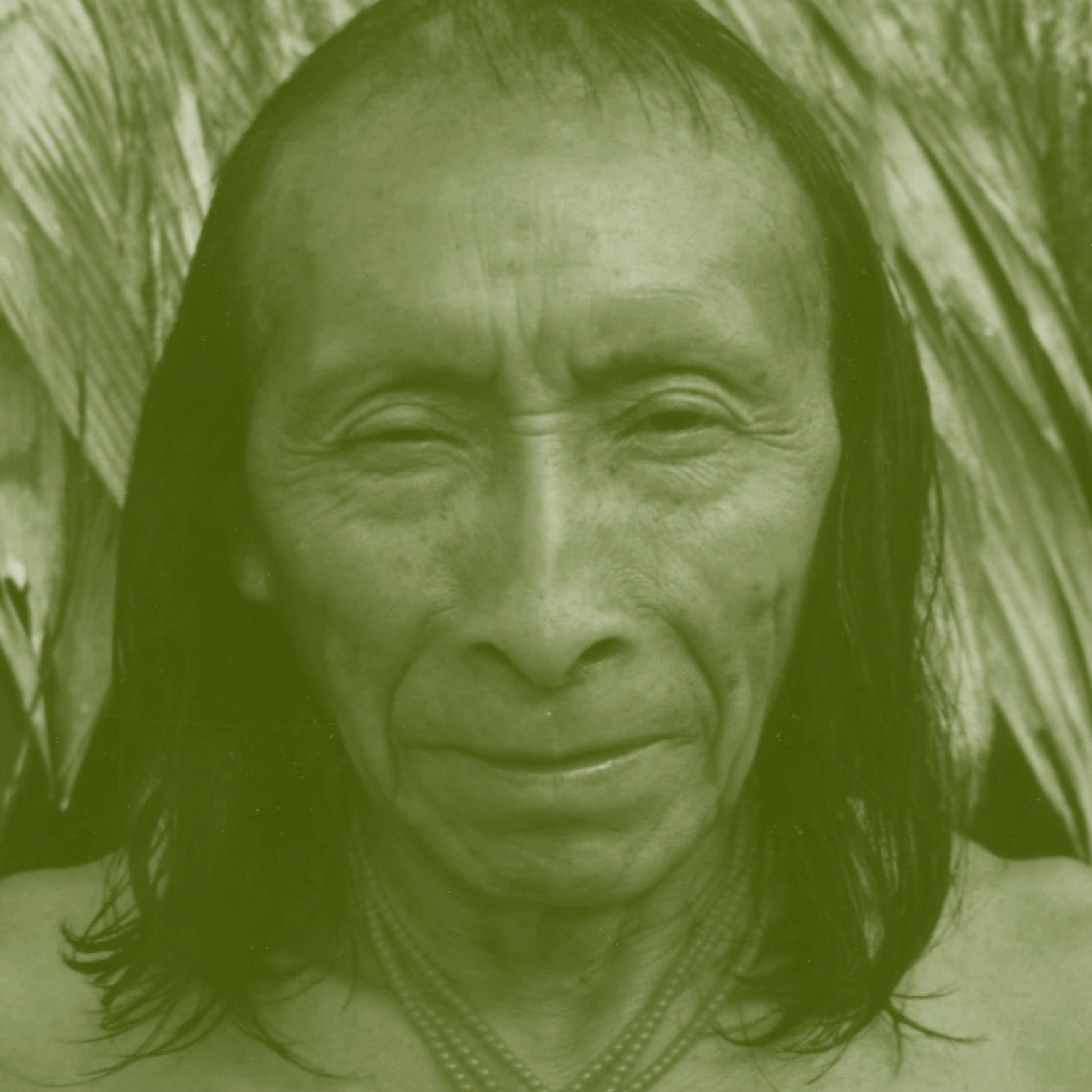




When the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues met at the United Nations for the first time in May 2002, it was an historical moment for many who had worked for years to make the Forum a reality. As they had long sought, indigenous peoples were able to speak for themselves in a new way, to present their views as full-fledged members of a United Nations body.

The Forum is an accomplishment built on the efforts of successive generations of indigenous peoples. It began as early as 1924 at the League of Nations, and continuing, since the 1970s, through decades of partnership with the United Nations.







Who are the Forum members?

The Forum is made up of 16 independent experts, functioning in their personal capacities, with eight of the members nominated by indigenous peoples and eight nominated by Governments. Governments may nominate indigenous experts, if they choose — and some have done so.

The Forum meets for 10 days each year, in New York or Geneva, or a location to be chosen by the Forum.



Why was the Forum established?

The Permanent Forum was created by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), by its resolution 2000/22, to:

- ◆ Discuss indigenous issues within the Council's mandate, including economic and social development, culture, environment, education, health and human rights;
- ◆ Provide expert advice and recommendations to the Council and to programmes, funds and agencies of the United Nations; and
- ◆ Raise awareness about indigenous issues, and help to integrate and coordinate activities in the UN system.



How are the members nominated and selected?

In the resolution establishing the Forum, the Council made clear its wish that the indigenous candidates be nominated in a fair and transparent process. They are to be appointed by the President of the Council on the basis of broad consultations with indigenous organizations, taking into account the diversity and geographical distribution of the indigenous peoples of the world as well as the principles of transparency, representativity and equal opportunity for all indigenous peoples, including local indigenous consultation processes.

The following seven socio-cultural regions are the basis for consultations and nominations: Africa; the Arctic; Asia; Central and South America and the Caribbean; Central and Eastern Europe, Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia; North America; and the Pacific [with one additional seat that rotates among the three

most highly populated regions: Africa; Asia; and Central and South America and the Caribbean. These regional groups consult with local organizations that confer at the grassroots level. The nominees of the regional indigenous processes are then submitted to the ECOSOC President. It is important to note that the members of the Forum do not represent a particular State, indigenous community or region; they are experts serving in their personal capacities.

The eight members nominated by Governments are elected by the Council, based on the five regional groupings of States normally used at the United Nations (Africa; Asia; Eastern Europe; Latin America and the Caribbean; and Western Europe and Other States), with three seats rotating.

The members serve a three-year term and may be re-elected or re-appointed for one additional term.





Chief Deskaheh

A few months before his death in 1925, Chief Deskaheh made a speech by radio in Rochester, New York. The following is an excerpt:

“This is the story of the Mohawks, the story of the Oneidas, of the Cayugas — I am a Cayuga — of the Onondagas, the Senecas, and the Tuscaroras. They are the Iroquois. Tell it to those who have not been listening. Maybe I will be stopped from telling it. But if I am prevented from telling it over, as I hope I do, the story will not be lost. I have already told it to thousands of listeners in Europe. It has gone into the records where your children can find it when I may be dead or be in jail for daring to tell the truth. I have told this story in Switzerland. They have free speech in little Switzerland. One can tell the truth over there in public, even if it is uncomfortable for some great people.

This story comes straight from Deskaheh, one of the chiefs of the Cayugas. I am the speaker of the Council of the Six Nations, the oldest League of Nations now existing. It was founded by Hiawatha. It is a League which is still alive and intends, as best it can, to defend the rights of the Iroquois to live under their own laws in their own little countries now left to them, to worship their Great Spirit in their own way, and to enjoy the rights which are as surely theirs as the white man's rights are his own.”



Portion of Deskaheh's last speech
from *Basic Call to Consciousness*,
by permission of The Book Publishing Company,
Summertown, Tennessee, USA

1923

The first indigenous ambassador to formally approach the international community was Cayuga Chief Deskaheh, who set out for the League of Nations in 1923 as the representative of the Six Nations of the Iroquois. In the time he spent in Geneva — over a year — working for recognition by the League of Nations, his cause came under serious consideration by some of the delegations, but in the end the League would not hear his case. Still determined, he made an eloquent address to the Swiss public and continued to fight for the rights of his people until his death in 1925. His tenacity and courage continue to inspire and nourish younger generations.

1924

To protest the breaking of the Treaty of Waitangi (New Zealand, 1840), which guaranteed the indigenous Maori ownership of their lands, T.W. Ratana, a Maori religious leader, travelled to London with a large delegation to petition King George for help, but he was denied access. He then sent part of his delegation to Geneva to approach the League of Nations, where they received similar treatment. The following year, 1925, Ratana himself traveled to Geneva, but he, too, was denied access.

When indigenous peoples were denied access or recognition, they had no recourse when

legal agreements with them were broken or disregarded.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) began investigations into forced labour using “native populations”.

1957

The ILO adopted the first international legal instrument concerning indigenous peoples and their rights, which was replaced by the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169) in 1989.

1970-71

In response to reports of human rights violations, in 1970 the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities recommended that there be a comprehensive study on the situation of indigenous peoples, and in 1971 it appointed Special Rapporteur José Martínez Cobo to undertake the work.

1977

As Special Rapporteur Martínez Cobo made progress reports to the Sub-Commission, the situation of indigenous peoples began to draw attention. Nearly 200 indigenous delegates from around the world went to Geneva to attend a conference of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on discrimination against indigenous people. Initially, many of

the Permanent Forum

them were not allowed entry, because they did not fit into any established category of organization. Special arrangements were quickly made by the United Nations to accommodate them, and similar arrangements have been maintained until today.

1981-84

The Martínez Cobo study, consisting of five volumes submitted from 1981 to 1984, proved to be a watershed. It appealed eloquently to the international community to act decisively on behalf of indigenous peoples.

1982

The Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) was established by ECOSOC to be a subsidiary body of the Sub-Commission with a mandate to review developments pertaining to the promotion and protection of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous populations, giving special attention to the evolution of standards concerning those rights. Shortly after its establishment, arrangements were made that are unique within the UN system to allow indigenous participation in the sessions of the Working Group.

1993

The United Nations proclaimed 1993 the International Year of the World's Indigenous People "to strengthen international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by

indigenous communities in areas such as human rights, the environment, development, education and health."

At the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna), a permanent forum for indigenous people was first called for.

1994

The International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004) was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly, and the establishment of a permanent forum for indigenous people was included as one of two major goals in its programme of activities.

All told, it took 80 years, almost the entire history of the League of Nations and the United Nations together, for indigenous voices to arrive on the podium of an official United Nations meeting. Finally they are speaking in their own voices.



Further steps on the road...



1995

The Commission on Human Rights established a Working Group to elaborate the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples prepared and transmitted to it by the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities.

2001

The Commission on Human Rights established the role of Special Rapporteur on the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people to gather information and report on human rights violations and to formulate recommendations to prevent and remedy such violations.

2004 -2005

On 22 December 2004, the General Assembly adopted the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (2005-2015) with the theme of "Partnership for action and dignity". The Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs was appointed as the Coordinator for the Second Decade, the objectives of which include promoting non-discrimination of indigenous peoples and ensuring their full and effective participation in decisions affecting them.

A Voluntary Trust Fund for the Second Decade was established to support the objectives of the Decade. Indigenous organizations or organizations working for indigenous peoples can apply for financial grants for projects in the priority areas of culture, education, health, human rights, the environment and social and economic development.

2006

In June 2006, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the Human Rights Council after more than twenty years of discussion. It was submitted to the General Assembly for adoption at its 61st session.

The Declaration addresses both individual and collective rights; cultural and identity rights, in addition to rights to education, health, employment, language and others. It outlaws discrimination against indigenous peoples and promotes their full participation in all matters that concern them. It also ensures their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own visions of economic and social and cultural development.



Who is indigenous? Who decides?

The question of who is or is not an indigenous group has been difficult to address. There are some countries that say they have no indigenous peoples living within their borders, while groups of people living in those countries who have distinct languages and cultures consider themselves indigenous to the lands on which they live, and are actively seeking to protect their cultures and their right to their lands and resources. A description of indigenous peoples found in the study by Special Rapporteur José Martínez Cobo is often cited. It is sometimes erroneously referred to as “the United Nations definition”, but, in practice, the United Nations asks whether indigenous groups identify themselves as such.



Participation at the Forum

The Economic and Social Council decided to use the same rules for participation at meetings of the Forum as those used by the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Indigenous organizations who have registered to participate in the meeting may do so as observers. States, United Nations bodies and organs, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council may do so as well. Organizations that have registered to participate may address the Forum, as time allows. These rules are exceptional within the United Nations system, and were created to include representatives of indigenous peoples.

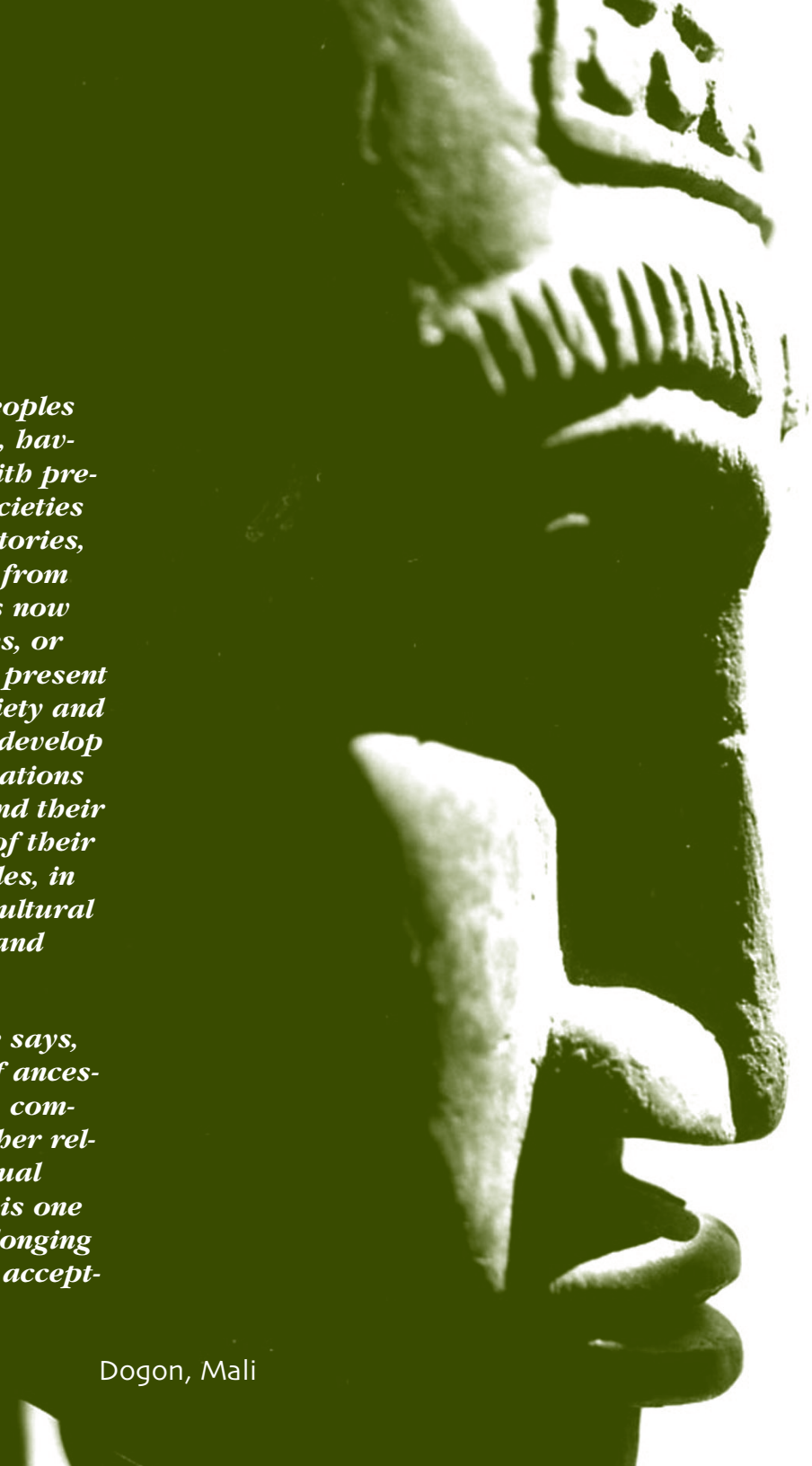
Indigenous organizations that wish to attend the Forum are strongly urged to pre-register.

Following is an often-cited description of indigenous people from the study by United Nations Special Rapporteur J. Martínez Cobo:

“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 in 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 systems.”

This historical continuity, he says, may consist of occupation of ancestral lands, common ancestry, common culture, language, or other relevant factors. On an individual basis, an indigenous person is one who identifies himself as belonging to such a group, and who is accepted by the group.

Dogon, Mali



Indigenous peoples around the world

Throughout the world today, it is widely recognized that indigenous peoples are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. It is estimated that there are 300 to 500 million indigenous people in more than 70 countries around the world, representing over 5,000 languages and cultures on every continent.

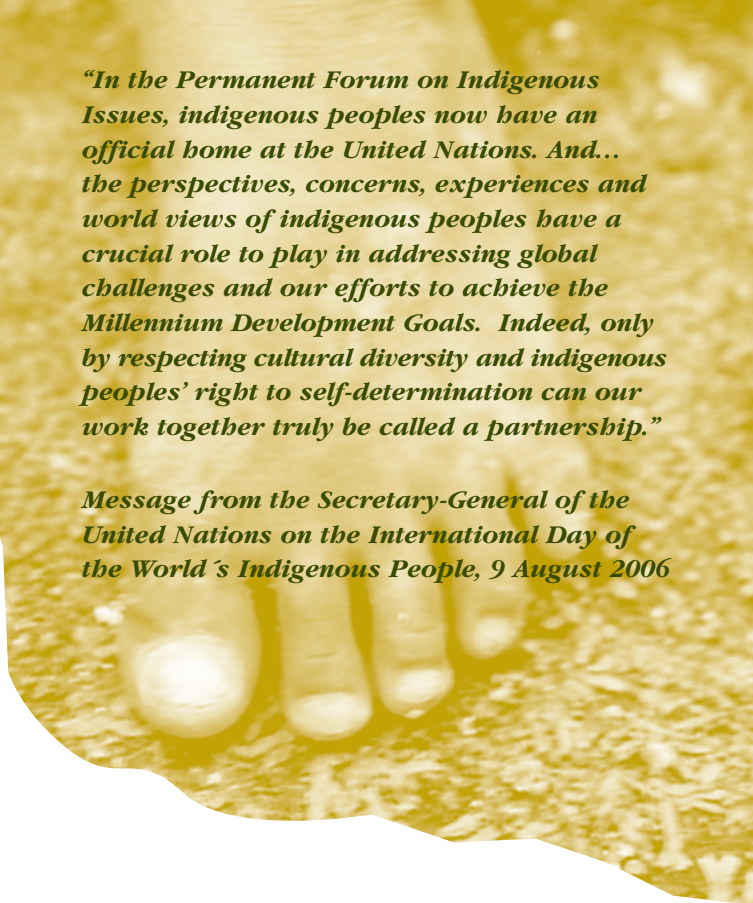
Indigenous peoples, in their closely dependent relationships to their environment, often state that they have guardianship of the earth – their terrestrial mother, the giver of all life. Expressed another way, they feel they are the spiritual landlords of nations, while the governing, or political landlords are usually not indigenous.

“In the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, indigenous peoples now have an official home at the United Nations. And... the perspectives, concerns, experiences and world views of indigenous peoples have a crucial role to play in addressing global challenges and our efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Indeed, only by respecting cultural diversity and indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination can our work together truly be called a partnership.”

Message from the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the International Day of the World’s Indigenous People, 9 August 2006

Today, many indigenous peoples are engaged in a struggle to remain on their lands and retain the right to their natural resources. Other indigenous peoples have long since been removed from their lands, denied their languages and traditional ways, and consequently been left impoverished.

Some members of later generations are now reclaiming languages and cultures, but dominant societies find themselves struggling with the financial and social costs of their earlier actions, costs that they are finding difficult to pay in full.



**For additional information,
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The Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was established by the General Assembly in 2002. Based at UN Headquarters in New York within the Division for Social Policy and Development of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Secretariat organizes the annual sessions of the Permanent Forum and provides support to its Members throughout the year.

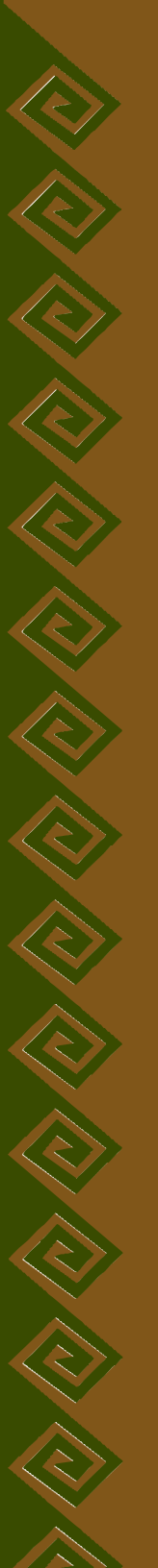
The Secretariat facilitates implementation within the UN system of the recommendations that emerge from each annual session and promotes awareness of indigenous issues within the UN system, governments and the public, serving as a source of information and a coordination point for advocacy efforts on issues concerning indigenous peoples.



Photos by Rebecca Sommer

Border design on cover from traditional Dineh rug design, USA





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