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THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES DISCUSSES CLIMATE CHANGE



Annual session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York – Photo: Pablo Lasansky/IWGIA

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (Permanent Forum) was established in 2000 and is an advisory body to the Economic and Social Council with a mandate to discuss indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights.

The Permanent Forum comprises 16 independent experts, functioning in their personal capacity, who serve as Members for a three-year term and may be re-elected or re-appointed for one additional term. Eight of the Members are nominated by governments and eight are nominated directly by indigenous organizations in their regions. The government-nominated members are elected by ECOSOC in line with the five regional groupings usually followed by the United Nations. The indigenous-nominated members are directly appointed by the President of ECOSOC after consultation with indigenous organisations and states. The indigenous members represent seven socio-cultural regions that are established to give broad representation to the world's indigenous peoples. The regions are Africa, Asia, Central and South America and the Caribbean, the Arctic, Central and Eastern Europe, North America and the Pacific.

The Seventh Session of the Permanent Forum

The Seventh Session of the Permanent Forum was held from 21 April – 2 May 2008 in New York. This was the first session since the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP or the Declaration), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2007. Around 3,000 indigenous representatives and other attendees, including parliamentarians, NGOs, academia, representatives of Member States, UN agencies and other inter-governmental organizations participated.

Each year, the Permanent Forum has a special theme and this year it was “Climate change, bio-cultural diversity and livelihoods: the stewardship role of indigenous peoples and new challenges”. This article summarises the discussions that took place.¹

Preparatory activities

Prior to the Permanent Forum session, a number of preparatory meetings were held and various reports prepared on the issue of indigenous peoples and climate change.

(left) Indigenous peoples fear their forests will be taken from them as a consequence of climate change mitigation initiatives such as the protection of carbon sinks – Photo: Christian Erni

Preparatory meetings

In April 2008, a UN international expert meeting on indigenous peoples and climate change was held in Darwin, Australia. The expert meeting discussed the effects of climate change on indigenous peoples, adaptation measures to climate change, carbon projects and carbon trading, and factors that enable or obstruct indigenous peoples' participation in the climate change processes.²

A number of regional preparatory meetings were held, among others in Asia, Latin America and in the North America Region, at which the indigenous representatives discussed the special theme, prepared statements and strategized on how to ensure that indigenous peoples' concerns are taken into consideration in the climate change discussions.

- The regional meeting in Latin America to prepare for the 7th session of the Permanent Forum was held in Sta. Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. The meeting focused on issues related to indigenous peoples and climate change as well as the current global discussion on mitigation and adaptation measures. The participants came up with concrete recommendations that were later presented at the session of the Permanent Forum.
- Other meetings included a two-day conference organised by IWGIA on "Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change" in February 2008. The event focused on the key issues facing indigenous peoples in the context of climate change, including its human rights aspects (see the article by Christina Nilsson in this issue).

Reports informing the Permanent Forum discussion on climate change

In September 2007, the Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues (AISG)³ held a meeting on climate change and indigenous peoples and a collated paper was prepared.⁴ The paper presents an overview of the impact of climate change on indigenous peoples, particularly the social, cultural, human rights and development impacts, along with the work of the different UN agencies that are part of the AISG on the issue of climate change and indigenous peoples.

In November 2007, the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum prepared an overview paper analysing the threats and challenges faced by indigenous peoples in relation to climate change. The paper notes that, despite the fact that [climate change is having a severe impact on indigenous peoples](#), they are very

rarely considered in public discourse on climate change. It concludes that, given past experiences of adjusting to environmental and socio-economic changes, an assessment of the adaptive capacity of indigenous peoples and their communities must take into account not only their inherent resiliences, but also differential rights, discrimination and other social processes that limit access to resources, power and decision-making.⁵

At its Sixth Session, the Permanent Forum appointed Victoria Tauli Corpuz and Aqqaluk Lynge as special rapporteurs to investigate the impact of climate change mitigation measures on indigenous peoples and on their territories and lands. The report (E/C.19/2008/10) summarizes the effects of climate change on indigenous peoples and includes a review of the impacts of mitigation and adaptation measures. The report concludes that there are many strategies that can be used effectively to mitigate climate change and to facilitate adaptation to climate change, such as sustainable forest management and sustainable agriculture, but that these strategies need to take into account ecological and human rights dimensions in order to ensure that indigenous peoples are not further adversely affected by climate change and its proposed solutions.⁶

Opening session

In the first-ever address to the Forum by a Head of State, President Evo Morales of Bolivia urged the Permanent Forum to develop a model for "how to live well", in order to counter an economic system in which a thirst for wealth had overwhelmed a sense of respect for sustainable living. With regard to the session's special theme on climate change, President Morales focused much of his address on the notion of Mother Earth as the wellspring of life, to be cherished and respected rather than treated as a tradable commodity. Indigenous peoples have the moral authority to shape a new model for living based on that philosophy, he stressed, having lived closely with Mother Earth and defended it over the ages.

President Morales' opening speech was followed by a video message from the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in which he applauded the choice of climate change as the special theme, stating that indigenous peoples "can and should play a role in the global response" due to their accumulation of first-hand knowledge on the impacts of environmental degradation, including climate change. Indigenous peoples know the economic and social conse-

quences, and they can and should play a role in the global response.

In her opening intervention, the Permanent Forum's Chair Victoria Tauli-Corpuz said that climate change is a major concern to indigenous peoples all over the world, not only because they are affected by both the problem and the solutions but, more importantly, because of the contributions they can make to mitigate it and the ways they are adapting to it. She said that she regarded climate change as the ultimate evidence of how unsustainable the dominant development model is and the strongest argument as to why indigenous peoples should radically change the unsustainable consumption and production systems perpetuated in their midst. While indigenous peoples have adapted to climate change for thousands of years, the magnitude and accelerated pace of climate change in this present era is unprecedented, presenting major challenges to indigenous peoples' capacity to adapt. This is not only because of the magnitude of the impacts but also because support from the international community has not been forthcoming. As stewards of the world's biodiversity and cultural diversity, and with their traditional livelihoods and ecological knowledge, indigenous peoples can significantly contribute to designing and implementing more appropriate and sustainable mitigation and adaptation measures. Victoria Tauli Corpuz also said that indigenous peoples could help craft the path towards developing low-carbon and sustainable communities.

Dialogue with governments and UN agencies

In the dialogue with governments, government representatives acknowledged that climate change poses a threat to indigenous livelihoods and that capacity building and more research into the impacts on indigenous peoples is needed urgently. Despite being most adversely affected, indigenous peoples are only rarely consulted in discussions on climate change. Numerous governments emphasized indigenous peoples' roles as primary actors on the frontline of climate change and fragile ecosystems, and argued that they should be included in climate change planning as their traditional knowledge could help to confront the challenge of widespread environmental degradation.

The UN agencies were almost unanimous in reporting on their efforts to implement the provisions of the UNDRIP and on their plans to use the Declaration as a framework for formulating their future programmes for indigenous peoples, including on the is-

sue of climate change. This year, 17 UN agencies made written submissions to the Permanent Forum, which is an important milestone on the path towards enshrining the provisions of the Declaration in customary international law, thus strengthening its binding nature.⁷

In the numerous statements from the various regional and thematic caucuses, as well as the collective statements, indigenous peoples told very similar stories of how they have the smallest ecological footprint and yet are the most severely affected by the adverse effects of climate change due to their dependence upon and close relationship with the environment and its resources. They emphasised that climate change exacerbates the difficulties already faced by indigenous communities, including political and economic marginalization, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination and unemployment.

They also raised concerns over the solutions to climate change currently being offered by the international community as they tend to overlook the rights of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples therefore called for the implementation of the UNDRIP as an effective response to climate change. The main issues that arose during the dialogue included the effects of climate change on indigenous peoples' human rights, concerns over proposed climate change mitigation initiatives and a call to the industrialized countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

The effects of climate change on indigenous peoples' human rights

Indigenous peoples stressed that the UN system and governments should recognise the critical importance of the effects of climate change on indigenous peoples' human rights. Indigenous peoples see the negative impacts of climate change on their land, forest and marine resources as a matter of life and death. The growing impact of climate change which, in some cases, has led to the loss of lives and has forced indigenous peoples to leave their lands, is a violation of the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination along with an entire range of other fundamental rights.

Climate change mitigation initiatives

Indigenous peoples expressed concern with both the problem of climate change and the proposed solutions. They also criticised the fact that they were not invited by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to participate in creating a new



Glaciers are melting in Nepal Himalaya– Photo: Marianne Olesen



Extreme weather conditions are more frequent as a consequence of climate change – Photo: IWGIA archive

climate change framework and the closed-door environment that prevails in the meetings of the UNFCCC, including those concerning the Kyoto Protocol. Indigenous peoples, as stewards of biological diversity and with their traditional knowledge, could contribute significantly to identifying proper and sustainable solutions as opposed to the present market-based solutions such as carbon trading and agro-fuels production, which are questionable both ethically and environmentally because they violate the rights of indigenous peoples and often result in more greenhouse gas emissions.

Indigenous peoples also expressed concern at the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects, some of which have caused the deaths of indigenous peoples who refused to hand over their territories for the purpose specified in the projects, as well as the recently adopted programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), which makes no reference to indigenous peoples' rights. Carbon trading has turned the Earth into a commodity while the promotion of agro-fuel production, mono-tree plantations and other similar initiatives are countering the efforts to find sustainable solutions by contributing to further environmental degradation.

Indigenous peoples therefore urged the world's decision-makers to show caution when planning climate change mitigation strategies. Despite having contributed the least to the acceleration of climate change, many indigenous peoples are bearing the brunt of misguided mitigation measures when, for example, hydro-power plants are flooding their lands, geothermal plants are displacing their sacred sites and nuclear power plants are affecting their health.

The industrialised countries must act

Indigenous peoples stressed that the industrialised countries are responsible for global climate change, with their wastefulness and over-consumption. The polluter, i.e. the industrialised countries, must take responsibility for their share of the harm that climate change has brought to indigenous peoples' lives and prevent further acceleration of climate change by developing a respect for the world and its environment.

Indigenous peoples also expressed concern at the fact that industrialised countries promote the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in developing countries as a precondition for taking responsibility for reducing emissions at home. The industrialised countries must demonstrate leadership by reducing emissions within their own borders and committing to substantial emissions reductions.

The recommendations of the Permanent Forum on climate change

Based on the dialogues with UN agencies, governments and indigenous peoples, and the recommendations presented in their statements, as well as the reports from the preparatory activities, the Permanent Forum members made their general observations on the issue of climate change and indigenous peoples.

The Permanent Forum noted that the unprecedented magnitude, accelerated pace and compound effects of climate change today present major challenges to indigenous peoples. Further, some of the mitigation measures seen as solutions to climate change are having negative impacts on indigenous peoples. As stewards of the world's biodiversity and



Glacial lakes are bursting in Nepal Himalaya – Photo: Kamal Rai



Qassiarsuk, South Greenland - Photo: Mark Nuttall

cultural diversity, indigenous peoples have ecological knowledge and experiences of adapting to a changing environment that could significantly contribute to designing and implementing holistic, appropriate and sustainable mitigation and adaptation measures. Indigenous peoples can also assist in crafting the path towards developing low-carbon release and sustainable communities.

The mechanisms designed to fight climate change must respond to the needs of indigenous peoples and include them as partners in designing and implementing programmes that are responsive to local problems and to the goals and visions of indigenous peoples. A human rights-based approach to development and an ecosystem approach should therefore guide the design and implementation of local, national, regional and global climate policies and projects.

At the conclusion of its seventh session, members of the Permanent Forum issued clear recommendations on a range of areas, including climate change, which are contained in their report on the Seventh Session.⁸ The Permanent Forum made general recommendations and recommendations related to participation, adaptation and mitigation, which must be implemented in accordance with the principles and rules of the UNDRIP.⁹

General recommendations

- The discussions and negotiations on climate change should respect the rights of indigenous peoples to nurture and develop their traditional knowledge and their environment-friendly technologies.
- The UNDRIP should serve as a key and binding framework in the formulation of plans for development and should be considered fundamental in all processes related to climate change at the local, national, regional and global levels. The safeguard policies of the multilateral banks and the existing and future policies on indigenous peoples of UN bodies and other multilateral bodies should be implemented in all climate change-related projects and programmes.
- States, UN agencies, bodies and funds, other multilateral bodies and financial institutions and other donors are urged to provide technical and financial support to protect and nurture indigenous peoples' natural resource management, environment-friendly technologies, biodiversity and cultural diversity and low-carbon, traditional livelihoods (pastoralism; rotational or swidden agriculture; hunting/gathering and trapping; marine and coastal livelihoods; high mountain agriculture; etc.).
- In relation to research, further studies into the impacts of climate change and climate change responses on indigenous peoples should be undertaken by the United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies, university research centres and relevant UN agencies. Two members of the Permanent Forum were appointed as special rapporteurs to prepare a report on various models of and best practices for mitigation and adaptation measures undertaken by indigenous peoples from various parts of the world.
- States responsible for major sources of pollution and emission of greenhouse gases are

urged to be accountable by enforcing and upholding stricter global pollution regulations that will apply to polluting parties.

- It is recommended that States develop mechanisms by which they can monitor and report on the impacts of climate change on indigenous peoples, mindful of their socio-economic limitations as well as spiritual and cultural attachment to lands and waters.

Participation

- The UNFCCC and relevant parties are urged to develop mechanisms for indigenous peoples' participation in all aspects of the international dialogue on climate change, particularly the forthcoming negotiations for the next Kyoto Protocol commitment period, including by establishing a working group on local adaptation measures and traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples.
- States are called upon to ensure that indigenous peoples who are undertaking their own mitigation measures are provided with policy support, technical assistance, funding and capacity-building in order to deepen their knowledge of climate change and enable them to implement more effective mitigation and adaptation strategies.
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is requested to undertake a specific assessment of the opportunities and threats for indigenous peoples arising from the various greenhouse gas emission strategies that are currently in place and will potentially come into operation to mitigate the impacts of climate change and it is requested that this assessment be undertaken with the full and effective participation of indigenous peoples around the world.
- Indigenous academics, scientists and traditional knowledge holders are urged to organize their own processes to consolidate their knowledge and experiences of climate change science into a report that can feed into the IPCC, the UNFCCC and the Permanent Forum.

Adaptation and mitigation

- It is recommended that the UNFCCC, in cooperation with States, provide adaptation funds to indigenous peoples affected by climate change-related disasters. Indigenous peoples whose lands have already disappeared or have

become uninhabitable or spoiled due to seawater rise, floods, droughts or erosion, and who have thus become environmental refugees or displaced persons, should be provided with appropriate relocation with the support of the international community.

- States, the World Bank and other multilateral and bilateral financial institutions are urged to consider alternative systems beyond the perpetuation of highly centralized fossil-fuel-based energy supplies and large-scale bioenergy and hydropower dams and increase their support for renewable, low-carbon and decentralized systems.
- The recommendations and proposals that emerged from the consultations of indigenous peoples and the World Bank on the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) and other carbon funds, such as the BioCarbon Fund, should be implemented by the World Bank and other relevant agencies. Indigenous peoples should be effectively involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of the FCPF. Displacement and exclusion of indigenous peoples from their forests, which may be triggered by projects funded by the FCPF, should be avoided at all costs. Indigenous peoples or their representatives should have a voice in and a vote on the decision-making body of the FCPF and other climate change funds that will impact on them. In the case of those who opt not to participate in reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation or in the projects supported by the FCPF, their choice should be respected. The Permanent Forum also calls on all parties to ensure that the UNDRIP is implemented when undertaking these processes.
- It is recommended that the renewed political focus on forests, stimulated by current policy debates on REDD under the UNFCCC, be used to help secure the rights of indigenous peoples living in forests and reward their historical stewardship role and continuing conservation and sustainable use of forests. According to the principle of free, prior and informed consent, indigenous peoples must not be excluded, and should be centrally involved in and benefit from deciding forest policies and programmes at all levels that deliver justice and equity and contribute to sustainable development, biodiversity protection and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

- The Permanent Forum notes that the current framework for REDD is not supported by most indigenous peoples. It is argued that existing REDD proposals reinforce a centralized top-down management of forests and undermine indigenous peoples' rights. In order to directly benefit indigenous peoples, new proposals for avoiding deforestation or reducing emissions from deforestation must address the need for global and national policy reforms and be guided by the UNDRIP, respecting rights to land, territories and resources; and the rights of self-determination and the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned.
- The Permanent Forum reaffirms the need for all actors to respect indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and hence to decide on mitigation and adaptation measures on their lands and territories.
- The Permanent Forum calls on indigenous peoples' organizations, UN agencies and NGOs to develop popular education materials on climate change and climate mitigation and adaptation measures and to undertake education and training activities at the local level.

In the context of the discussions related to the Permanent Forum's report and its recommendations on the special theme of climate change, it should be noted that, on the last day of the session, during the adoption of the Permanent Forum's report, the Latin American group raised concerns over the report. The group believed that the report did not reflect their concerns as to the devastating effects of emissions trading and deforestation. On behalf of the Permanent Forum, Victoria Tauli Corpuz responded thoroughly to the concerns raised by the Latin America Group and gave detailed explanations regarding the considerations

made by the Permanent Forum on the initiatives for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and the carbon market. Victoria Tauli Corpuz called all participants' attention to several paragraphs in the report which the Permanent Forum members believed reflected the concerns expressed by the Latin American group on this crucial issue. □

Notes

- 1 Further information is available in various Permanent Forum documents at: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/session_seventh.html.
- 2 A summary report and meeting documents from the expert meeting are available at http://www.ias.unu.edu/sub_page.aspx?catID=107&ddIID=650
- 3 The Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues has been established to support and promote the mandate of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues within the United Nations system.
- 4 The collated paper is available at: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/E_C19_2008_CRP2.doc
- 5 The paper is available at: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/EGM_cs08_Overview.doc
- 6 The report is available at: <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UN-DOC/GEN/N08/277/65/PDF/N0827765.pdf?OpenElement>
- 7 Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service UNPFII 7th Session Update No. 5.
- 8 At the time of writing, only an unedited version of the report was available. The final version will be made available on the Permanent Forum's website: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/session_seventh.html
- 9 The recommendations presented in this article are not the complete list of recommendations made by the Permanent Forum, neither are they given in their entirety. Some of the recommendations have also been merged.

Lola Garcia-Alix has been the Director of IWGIA since 2007. Prior to her appointment as Director, she was the coordinator of IWGIA's Human Rights Program.