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## Indigenous Peoples and UN Aid: A Country's First Inhabitants are No Longer Last in Line

*The UN envisions a world that is human-centred and genuinely democratic, where all human beings are full participants and determine their own destinies.*

—*Millennium Forum Final Declaration*<sup>1</sup>

In 1982, the United Nations established the Working Group on Indigenous Populations to investigate and address the human rights issues affecting indigenous peoples. Encroaching development and globalization have precipitated the establishment of a protected status for indigenous peoples. The historical backgrounds and unique characteristics of these populations warranted special protection.<sup>2</sup> As a subsidiary of the Economic and Social Council's Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights,<sup>3</sup> the Working Group "has a twofold mandate: to review developments pertaining to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples and to give attention to the evolution of international standards concerning indigenous rights."<sup>4</sup>

The Working Group is one of the largest United Nations forums for human rights. It is open to all representatives of indigenous peoples and their communities, including governmental and non-governmental agencies. The Group's preparation of a draft declaration on the rights of indigenous people in 1985 wove to-

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<sup>1</sup> *Millennium Forum Adopts Final Declaration, reprinted in G.A. Press Release, U.N. Doc. GA/9712 (26 May 2000).*

<sup>2</sup> *See Debating Activities of International Decade of World's Indigenous People, Third Committee Hears Calls for Sharper Definition of 'Indigenous,' reprinted in G.A. Press Release, U.N. Doc. GA/SHC/3595 (17 October 2000).*

<sup>3</sup> The Sub-Commission was formed in 1947 at the first session of the Commission on Human Rights. Originally titled the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, the Economic and Social Council gave the Sub-Commission its current title in 1999. *See Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, available at <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/2/sc/htm>.*

<sup>4</sup> United Nations High Commissioner For Human Rights, *Indigenous People, available at [http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/10/c/ind/ind\\_sub.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/10/c/ind/ind_sub.htm)* (drawing from ESCOSOR Res. 34 (7 May 1982)).

gether all the comments and suggestions of participants in the Group's meetings and formed the basis of the declaration which was adopted in its final version in July 1993.

The Working Group, along with the General Assembly, has created significant avenues for indigenous peoples to become involved on their own behalf. Through a series of programs, events, and funds, indigenous people are given the opportunity to participate in United Nation activities sponsored for indigenous groups. Additionally, experts on indigenous groups cooperate with the indigenous peoples in order to arrive at workable solutions for heightened awareness, both within indigenous populations themselves and the public at large. A few of the programs that have begun to accomplish these goals are examined below.

#### INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The General Assembly proclaimed 1993 the International Year of the World's Indigenous People in order to raise public consciousness about indigenous concerns.<sup>5</sup> As a response to a recommendation at the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, the General Assembly established 1995–2004 as the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People and the Commission on Human Rights requested a priority consideration for the creation of a permanent forum.<sup>6</sup>

#### INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The International Decade of the World's Indigenous People was created with the main goal of "strengthening international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous people in such areas as human rights, the environment, development, education, and health."<sup>7</sup> The Decade's theme, "Indigenous people: partnership in action" reflects the goals of education and action through the implementation of various programs and funds. Significantly, the Indigenous Fellowship Program was created in 1997 to

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<sup>5</sup> G.A. Resolution 75, U.N. GAOR, 47<sup>th</sup> Sess., U.N. Doc. A/RES/47/75 (1992).

<sup>6</sup> See ECOSOR, 56<sup>th</sup> Sess., U.N. Doc. E/RES/2000/22 (2000) (referencing U.N. Doc. A/CONF157/24 (Part I), Chap. III, Res. 48/163 (21 December 1993); Res. 30 (3 March 1995)).

<sup>7</sup> G.A. Resolution 268, U.N. GAOR, 55<sup>th</sup> Sess., U.N. Doc. A/C.3/55/L.19; A/55/268 (2000) (referencing U.N. Doc. A/RES/48/163 (1993)).

give indigenous individuals the opportunity to gain experience in the human rights field within the United Nations and to serve as resources in their communities. The United Nations Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations and the United Nations Trust Fund for the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People provide monies for indigenous organizations and individuals to participate in activities, forums, and groups organized by the Working Group through the contributions from Governments, non-governmental organizations, and private and public entities.<sup>8</sup>

#### PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

The Economic and Social Council adopted a resolution to establish this forum on 31 July 2000, seven years after the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights first suggested such a forum.<sup>9</sup> The forum was created in order to "ensure coordination and regular exchange of information among interested parties - Governments, United Nations and indigenous people - on an ongoing basis."<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the forum will serve as an advisory body to the Council with regard to economic and social development, education, health, culture, and human rights in order to promote awareness of and disseminate information about indigenous issues.

#### INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The International Decade for the World's Indigenous People proclaimed 9 August, the International Day of the World's Indigenous People. This past August, the sixth observance of the Day, provided an opportunity to acknowledge that there are more than 300 million indigenous people in more than 70 countries worldwide.<sup>11</sup> Hundreds gathered at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to participate in a traditional ceremony with the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe; a prayer for world peace. The theme of the day was "indigenous youth and children." A dialogue on edu-

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<sup>8</sup> See *Third Committee Turns to Issues of World's Indigenous Peoples*, reprinted in G.A. Press Release, U.N. Doc. GA/SHC/3594; G.A. Resolution 268, U.N. GAOR, 55<sup>th</sup> Sess., U.N. Doc. A/55/268 (2000).

<sup>9</sup> See *UN Establishes Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues*, reprinted in ECSOR Press Release, U.N. Doc. ECOSOC/5932 (31 July 2000).

<sup>10</sup> ECOSOR, 56<sup>th</sup> Sess., U.N. Doc. E/RES/2000/22 (2000)

<sup>11</sup> See *Assembly President Stresses Importance of Indigenous Peoples in Efforts to Bring Peace, Promote Sustainable Development, Eradicate Poverty*, reprinted in G.A. Press Release, U.N. Doc. GA/SM/184; OBV/153 (7 August 2000).

cational and health needs and the dangers posed by war and civil conflicts provided participants with the opportunity to craft solutions for their own communities and consult with experts.

All of these events have led to a greater degree of participation for indigenous groups within the United Nations, as well as heightened awareness of indigenous concerns by member states. On 16 October 2000, the Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural) considered the program of activities which would continue to foster the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People.<sup>12</sup> The Committee found that in many instances, because of the prevalence of colonial systems in governments, it was necessary to bridge the gap between indigenous groups and their governments. "True reconciliation between governments and first people could be achieved only with practical outcomes that improved the living standards of the disadvantaged."<sup>13</sup> Representatives of member states discussed the various implications through which indigenous people had been disadvantaged in their own countries and found that the Working Group's initiatives, studies, and programs, in addition to the Permanent Forum, all increased interest from their governments in recognizing and creating indigenous friendly policies.<sup>14</sup>

Increased political awareness by both member states and indigenous groups has led to a greater involvement of indigenous peoples in globalization issues. At the Regional Conference of the Americas and the Caribbean in Santiago, Chile (5-7 December 2000),<sup>15</sup> the special problems of indigenous people were discussed with candor. In addition to the awareness created by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination<sup>16</sup> has illustrated the myriad of obstacles facing indigenous groups today. The persistence of these problems endures today, especially with regard to

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<sup>12</sup> See *Third Committee Turns to Issues of World's Indigenous Peoples*, reprinted in G.A. Press Release, U.N. Doc. GA/SHC/3594 (16 October 2000).

<sup>13</sup> See *id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> See Regional Conference of the Americas and the Caribbean, 5-7 Dec. 2000, Santiago de Chile, Chile, available at <http://www.unhchr.ch/hurricane/. . /7DA5E32E6FA37A43C12569B2004A21DB?opendocumen>.

<sup>16</sup> See United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, available at <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/cerd.htm>.

land distribution and land rights, poverty, lack of adequate legal protection for indigenous peoples and their cultures, and lack of educational opportunities. While a number of States have taken measures to remedy these problems, much remains to be done, especially in changing the attitude of citizens. The Durban Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance will provide a significant opportunity for new ideas and new approaches to fighting contemporary and traditional intolerance for a more unified and inclusive vision of the human race.<sup>17</sup>

In response to comments from indigenous journalists who felt that the mainstream media either ignores issues of concern to indigenous peoples or portrays them in stereotypic, folkloric, and outdated realities, the United Nations sponsored a four-day workshop for journalists from indigenous groups and mainstream media in New York. The workshop's aim was to improve the public perception of the cultures of indigenous peoples and to promote their rights. The workshop addressed the issue of political sensitization, and tried to develop an understanding of the marketplace realities within which journalists work. Additionally, it attempted to provide a foundation for international guidelines to be used by mainstream media when reporting on indigenous people.<sup>18</sup>

The creation and implementation of United Nations programs, events, and funds for indigenous people are historic steps in the recognition of first peoples. To overcome the marks of colonization, education and participation from indigenous groups within the United Nations and other governmental organizations is vital. To adeptly combat the social and political problems indigenous people face in an ever-increasing global world, the United Nations has realized that a protected status is not sufficient. Rather, education and communication are the stepping stones to understanding.

*Michelle Bougdanos*

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<sup>17</sup> See United Nations High Commissioner For Human Rights, *Regional Conference of the Americas and the Caribbean* (5 December 2000), available at <http://www.unhchr.ch/hurricane/hu.../7DA5E32E6FA37A43C12569B2004A21DB?opendocumen>.

<sup>18</sup> See United Nations Press Release, *Note to Correspondents* (8 December 2000), available at <http://www.unhchr.ch/hurricane/hu.../94C4C5A5152BFFC3C12569B2002D49BE?opendocumen>.

