

**Summary Report on the 6<sup>th</sup> Session of the Permanent Forum  
on Indigenous Issues**

**(14 – 25 May 2007)**

## **Report on the 6<sup>th</sup> Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**

### **Part I. Introduction and History of the Forum**

Originated in the minds of the members of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues developed into a formal setting for indigenous peoples to participate and communicate directly with governments and civil society. Initially aiming to ensure the full and free participation of indigenous people in all matters of concern to them, the Forum has emerged into a powerful venue for indigenous peoples around the world to share ideas, collaborate on issues, gain support, and create unity.

The historic first session, taking place in 2002 at the UN Headquarters in New York, welcomed approximately 1,000 worldwide representatives of indigenous peoples with Secretary-General Kofi Annan warmly proclaiming to the world's indigenous peoples, "You have a home at the United Nations."

Over the past six years, the Permanent Forum has become one of the two largest, and most vibrant, conferences held at the United Nations. Participation of indigenous representatives has grown by 50% since its inception, with approximately 1,500 IP attending the sixth session. With 30 United Nations agencies, 70 member states, 30 Indigenous Parliamentarians, and over 60 side events, the Forum has gained global recognition and is considered to be one of the top 10 pressing international issues.

Accessibility to funding may affect indigenous people's attendance at PFII. Currently, financial support may be sought in a variety of ways, such as governmental donors and cooperation agencies, UN agencies and inter-governmental bodies and programmes, (i.e. UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples, World Bank Facility for Indigenous Peoples, Secretariat), and Foundations (public and private donors).<sup>1</sup>

### **Part II. Evolution of the Indigenous Peoples Movement: The Sixth Session of the PFII**

After 5 years of confronting difficult issues facing the indigenous peoples community, the Forum decided to tackle the theme of "Lands, Territories, and Natural Resources" at its 6<sup>th</sup> Session. The theme was chosen in response to the growing need to directly address the interconnectedness between indigenous people's rights to land and natural resources and environmental issues, cultural heritage, legal rights, spiritual attainment, and indigenous knowledge. Due to indigenous peoples' deep connection and dependence on the land, they are often the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, natural disasters, and the environment's response to overuse of the earth's fragile resources. In particular, indigenous peoples in coastal areas are directly realizing flooding, droughts, land degradation, as well as pollution of food and water sources. Many participants emotively spoke about their right to land, the importance of balance, and their spiritual connection with the earth. As land continues to be stripped from indigenous peoples by corporations and governments, often in the name of development, action is needed immediately.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ohchr.org/english/about/funds/indigenous/sources.htm> for a list of additional donors financing participation of indigenous participants to the Working Group on Indigenous Populations and Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

The topics addressed in the theme continue to be important and difficult issues for indigenous peoples, governments, and agencies.

Groups that have received special notice, and encouragement to increase participation in the PFII are women and children. Several special events and panel discussions were devoted to the topic of women's rights<sup>2</sup> and youth involvement.<sup>3</sup> The PFII forum members and participants warmly received ideas of moving towards engaging indigenous youth in active involvement and incorporating their fresh, new ideas into the forum and in addressing national issues. Two youth groups, one from the South Pacific and Ecuador, were especially well received. One particularly impressive child from Ninex Indigena Ecuador Ecuariunari – Conaie spoke about the importance of uniting not only indigenous youth, but inviting all youth to the PFII, to join together and learn about how important decisions about indigenous people are made.

*Subsection 1: Highlights of the discussions with agencies, governments, and indigenous peoples*

Many agencies recognized the importance of the connection between indigenous peoples and their land. In particular, UNESCO emphasized the importance of land rights in identity and cultural preservation. Both WIPO and UNDP stressed the importance of protecting IP's valuable intellectual property rights. UNDP estimated that IP medicinal knowledge is worth approximately \$60B. There was also strong support of empowering indigenous peoples networks through development of negotiation skills, more smaller meetings outside of the PFII, as well as a need for codifying existing indigenous customary law.

Of special note, UNEP did not submit a report and had no official representatives present; their absence was noticed. A participant, noting that there was a positive response to the recommendation adopted at a meeting in Nairobi for implementing an IP policy, questioned why there were no documents submitted that reported on this. In response to the participants question asking "What happened to the recommendation to UNEP to develop a policy of IP; is the recommendation being implemented?" the Chairperson responded that UN officials met with representatives last week to work towards implementing a policy and are working on it.

It is important to note that not all organizations have submitted accounts and practices don't always follow policy. Mr. Wilton Littlechild gave closing remarks, thanking all the agencies for their detailed reports, but stressed that all of the agencies failed to include adequate financial information. He emphasized the importance of documenting and tracing the financial aspects of these organization and recommend that this be remedied next year in order to make the reports complete.

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<sup>2</sup> Panel Discussion on Violence Against Women; Indigenous women's conversation with the Special Rapporteurs of Human Rights Council; Panel discussion among Indigenous Women of the Americas (Abya-Yala); Panel discussion on Indigenous Women, Lands, territories and resources; Panel discussion on Funding for Indigenous Women's Rights

<sup>3</sup> Consultation on the General Comment on Indigenous Child Rights; Breakfast Briefing: Be seen, be heard: Indigenous Youth participation in development; Launching of the International Network of Indigenous Youths and Children; Panel discussion: Empowerment of indigenous youth using media technology; Panel presentation on the Agenda for the accomplishment of indigenous children rights in Ecuador

Both agencies and indigenous peoples used the forum mainly to address thoughts and feelings. It was clear that the forum was widely used as a space for indigenous peoples to express frustration with their tragic history of oppressive treatment by the government and society. While these statements are a necessary part of the process, and helpful in uniting IP with common experiences, very little time is spent discussing implementation strategies.

Governments that were present contributed a valuable perspective to the Forum. The main governmental issue raised was that of data disaggregation. Currently, indigenous peoples are reported as making up more than 370 million of the world's population, with representation in over 70 countries. Accurately accounting for the population of IP is of major relevance in gaining recognition and rights, as well as vital for more effective unity building. The Chairperson acknowledged this as a truly large problem.

Of importance is the recognition of the few tense moments that occurred between governments and that country's indigenous people. In particular the government of Australia and the Aborigines differed on their perception of land rights deals. This provides an open space for opposing groups to confront problems and express their views on these relevant issues.

A complete list of participants will be available in the annex of the "Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: Report on the sixth session."

### Part III. Moving forward: Conclusions and Recommendations

Many of the board members expressed concern for timely adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

On May 25<sup>th</sup> the forum adopted its recommendations on the six mandated areas of the Permanent Forum and on the Millennium Development Goals: (a) Economic and social development, (b) Environment, (c) Health, (d) Education, (e) Culture, (f) Human rights, as well as (g) the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. Recommendations were given to continue conducting studies on data collection and disaggregation, as well as to increase participation of the youth at the PFII, as well as in national political issues. While recognizing the accomplishments and successes of the Forum, chair members voiced the need to respond to violation of indigenous rights with active, local participation.

#### *7<sup>th</sup> Session of PFII*

The PFII adopted its recommendations for the 7<sup>th</sup> Session. Many of the board members expressed concern for timely adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. The theme for the 7<sup>th</sup> Session will be "Climate change, biocultural diversity, and livelihood: Stewardship role of Indigenous People and New Challenges." A chair member spoke about the importance of regaining dignity in the coming years. The forum also recommended devoting more time and attention to the Pacific. They recommended that the Voluntary Fund give additional support to those applicants from the Pacific in order to enable them to participate in the 7<sup>th</sup> Session of the Forum. Next year's Forum is scheduled to be held in New York through the dates of 21 April- 2 May.