

**48th session of the Human Rights Council**

**Annual half-day panel discussion on the rights of indigenous peoples**

***Theme: The situation of human rights of indigenous peoples facing the COVID-19 pandemic, with a special focus on the right to participation***

**Anne Nuorgam, Chairperson of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**

Excellencies, Ladies, and gentlemen,

We have heard how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed, and in many instances exacerbated, the pre-existing inequalities endured by indigenous peoples. During COVID, indigenous peoples in more 90 countries suffered negative effects to their human rights due to inequities and discrimination including limited or no access to information, holistic medical care, medical supplies, food, housing and more. Lack of recognition of IPs by some Member States often produced a culturally inadequate response.

Today however, I would like to focus on some specific issues that the Permanent Forum identified over the past year as key problems for indigenous peoples during this pandemic. These issues are the digital divide, autonomy, self-governance, consultation, and participation. And they are crucial for the inclusion of indigenous peoples in the global community's plans to "build back better".

The Permanent Forum was unable to organize its annual session in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This year we were able to conduct our session, although it was mostly in an online virtual format for Forum Members and Member States and totally virtual for indigenous peoples. This virtual format made the participation of indigenous peoples in the session very difficult, and it reduced their participation significantly. Nevertheless, we were able to conduct our work and finalize a report.

For the past two years the informal hearings with indigenous peoples to consider ways to enable the participation of indigenous peoples' representatives and institutions in meetings of relevant United Nations bodies on issues affecting them - did not take place. Indigenous peoples requested postponement, noting that virtual consultations could not be adequately representative of indigenous peoples.

This digital divide has seriously affected the futures of large numbers of indigenous children and youth who have lost more than a year of education due to cancelled classes and a lack of online connectivity. Overall, the digital divide has obstructed the participation of indigenous peoples in important decision-making spaces at all levels, threatening to render them invisible and posing obstacles in exercising their rights. While the effects of this pandemic will eventually pass, the changes it has brought to the way we live will stay. Indigenous peoples must be able to reap the benefits of digital connectivity in a changed world if their full participation is to be ensured.

The issues of participation, autonomy, and self-governance, were discussed extensively under the theme of this year's Forum session: "Peace, justice and strong institutions: the role of indigenous peoples in implementing Sustainable Development Goal 16". More than ever within the context of the pandemic, the Permanent Forum noted the importance of governments recognizing indigenous peoples' representative institutions. These institutions promote and protect the cultures, health, livelihoods, identities, and languages of indigenous peoples.

During this year's session, the Forum noted that indigenous peoples' needs have often been neglected in the emergency response measures taken by Member States in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Let me stress that this problem has been widespread – not only during this pandemic, – indigenous peoples, in most countries and regions, continue to be left behind. Although the right to participation is clearly recognized by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, many Member States still lag-behind in establishing adequate mechanisms to ensure the participation of indigenous peoples at all levels.

This too must change as the global community, including the UN system sets out policies and plans to build back better.

Excellencies, Ladies, and gentlemen,

The Permanent Forum noted the positive outcomes for indigenous peoples able to exercise their right to autonomy and self-determination during the COVID pandemic. Building upon successive expert reports written by Forum Members, on this topic at its last session, the Forum committed to facilitating informal online regional dialogues with representatives of indigenous peoples to support the development of guiding principles for the realization of the rights of indigenous peoples to autonomy and self-government.

These online regional dialogues will be organized before the end of 2021 for each of the seven socio-cultural regions. and will result in an informal paper to support further discussion at the next Forum session. The Permanent Forum welcomes the participation and contribution of Member States during these informal dialogues.

The world is confronting various crises that have been amplified during the COVID pandemic. The response must be global, interconnected, and built upon support for indigenous autonomy and self-governance.

I look forward to an interesting dialogue with you all