

IFAD AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

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IFAD is a specialised agency of the UN that provides loans to Member States to enable poor rural people to take steps to improve their situations so that one day they will be able to live without fear, hunger and suffering.

In the 25 years since it was created, IFAD has maintained an exclusive focus on reducing poverty in rural areas throughout the world. In the process, we learned that the real poverty experts are the rural poor themselves.

Today, we rely on them for their perspectives, expertise and guidance.

We work closely with them to develop and finance projects that will enable them to overcome poverty. We also work by bringing together a variety of partners, including national and provincial governments, donors, non-governmental organizations NGOs and community groups.

Because of our grassroots experience, we have learned the importance of paying special attention in all that we do to the unique circumstances and specific aspirations of people living in poverty.

We have learned that poverty is very much linked to marginalization. In this regard, indigenous peoples are among the most vulnerable and marginalized of the rural poor.

Living in remote areas that are often outside the mainstream of national economies and development support, they invariably lack access to roads, schools, health services and other essential infrastructure and services.

In many areas where we fund projects for indigenous peoples, we find that they are being increasingly displaced from land ownership.

We have also seen that what little development they have received has, until recently, been displaced by the primary concerns of the mainstream societies.

Conventional industrial and agrarian sectors rarely flourish in the areas where indigenous peoples live because of high production costs and other disadvantages.

There are attractive assets in areas where indigenous peoples live, but past efforts to exploit them have sometimes led to dispossession of the local indigenous peoples.

The current process of globalization, in the context of weak property rights of indigenous peoples, increases the risks of further marginalization. Moreover, indigenous peoples are ill-equipped to cope with the consequences and the opportunities of economic liberalization and globalization.

Furthermore, as indigenous peoples become aware that their rights are being ignored, they are increasingly frustrated. The geographical overlap between on-going conflict areas and the areas that indigenous peoples inhabit suggests that ending the marginalization of indigenous peoples would certainly promote the stability needed to foster sustainable development for all.

IFAD's special interest in supporting indigenous peoples does not, however, stem only from issues of poverty reduction, social justice and humanitarian concerns. The Fund also values the enormous unrealized potential of indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples' value systems are often based on a close relationship with natural resources, for both subsistence and spiritual needs. Consequently, indigenous peoples play a crucial role in the stewardship of the Earth's natural resources and biodiversity.

- Indigenous peoples in general and indigenous women in particular are also repositories of rich and varied local systems of traditional knowledge. These systems include immense knowledge about ecosystem management, technologies, medicinal plants and local crops that are increasingly attracting the attention of commercial interests.

The experience of IFAD with indigenous peoples comes mainly from Asia and the Pacific and from Latin America, where the Fund has identified indigenous peoples as a major target group. In these two regions, IFAD has invested USD 736 million in projects that support indigenous peoples. This is roughly about 20% of the total loans in these regions. Over the years, we have gradually developed an ability to address the following issues of crucial importance to indigenous peoples:

- Securing their access to their lands
- Empowering them through capacity-building and genuine participation
- Valuing and revitalizing their indigenous knowledge and culture
- Promoting inter-cultural awareness
- Supporting bilingual and cross-cultural education
- Enhancing indigenous identity and self-esteem
- Promoting, in a culturally sensitive way, women's capacity for autonomous action in the face of constricting social sanctions and structural inequalities
- Strengthening indigenous peoples' institutions and fostering apex organizations
- Building the coalition of indigenous peoples

Securing the land rights of indigenous peoples is perhaps the central focus of most IFAD funded projects. Some of the investment projects have initiated a dialogue on indigenous rights with governments to exploit treaties that governments may have already signed.

Some projects support participatory mapping of territorial boundaries. These may introduce the idea of three-dimensional mapping, which leads to a consensus on what each participating community 'owns'.

Some other projects provide funding for establishing legal defence funds for reducing the transaction costs of legal cases. For example, in an innovative project in Nepal, indigenous men and women will be provided with information and training on their rights and then helped to assert those rights themselves. This approach is likely to enhance sustainability because it gives indigenous peoples themselves a greater awareness of the kind of claims they can make and how they can make them.

IFAD has also acquired some experience in imitating culturally sensitive approaches, in revitalizing traditional knowledge systems and in blending them with modern technology in a broad range of areas, including:

- soil and water conservation
- crop and livestock husbandry
- participatory research
- traditional medical practices

IFAD has also gained useful experience in preventing conflicts and supporting peacemaking by working closely with several indigenous peoples' communities. This experience includes supporting the involvement of women as peace brokers.

IFAD believes that, in spite of the accomplishments made thus far, accomplishments due mostly to the work of indigenous peoples themselves, more strategic interventions and more effective advocacy is required to place indigenous peoples' perspectives and concerns before decision-makers at all levels.

IFAD has gained experience in building pro-indigenous peoples partnerships, both through advocacy campaigns and participation in events highlighting poverty and sustainable development. It has established close networks with both the indigenous caucus and like-minded partners at the World Summit and it helped to establish an informal interagency forum in Latin America.

Based on this experience, IFAD is now a member of the partnership recently established by the Danish and Greenland Government in support of indigenous peoples' rights and sustainable development. In addition, on the basis of its experience primarily in Asia and Latin America, IFAD can replicate and, in partnership with governments and other like minded partners, scale up innovative initiatives in the following areas:

- **Strengthening or recovering indigenous peoples' rights in their ancestral lands and related resources**

Based on its experience, IFAD can, in close collaboration with the International Land Coalition (housed at IFAD) and other partners, expand its programmes to assist



national governments in implementing reforms that restore the rights of indigenous peoples to their traditional territories and the corresponding natural resources. This would involve support for participatory demarcation, legal recognition and titling. In addition, in collaboration with CIFOR, IFAD would engage in a programme for improving forest governance as a means of conflict prevention or resolution.

● **Supporting the preparation and implementation of land management plans incorporating indigenous knowledge**

In collaboration with the Global Mechanism of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (also housed at IFAD), IFAD is going to assist indigenous communities in establishing a process to document indigenous knowledge systems in natural resources management. The Global Mechanism and IFAD are about to start this process in Meso America. This work would systematize information required to draw up and implement environmentally sound indigenous management plans, including – where advisable – the blending of traditional and modern technologies in a context of participatory research and development. This documentation would be complemented with assistance in fostering legislation for protecting indigenous intellectual property rights.

● **Working out innovative mechanisms for compensating indigenous peoples for the environmental services they provide to the local, regional and global economy**

In Asia, IFAD, in collaboration with the International Agroforestry Centre, and a consortium of national and international partners, is supporting a regional initiative aimed at developing working models to compensate indigenous communities for the environmental services they provide. This initiative is focusing on watershed services, carbon sequestration, biodiversity protection and eco-labelling. These mechanisms will use market instruments to assign a value to the environmental services. Based on the experience gained from this initiative, IFAD expects to collaborate with governments and other partners to ensure that indigenous peoples benefit from these and other financing mechanisms to pursue, simultaneously, the goals of poverty reduction, sustainable natural resources management and environmental service delivery.

We, at IFAD, believe that the way forward is to recognize the following principles while working with the indigenous peoples, and indeed with all marginalized groups:

- Support local ownership to ensure that those motivated by money, power and authority do not hijack projects
- Support responsible community actions by enhancing dialogue between villagers and their local authorities to encourage good governance of public resources
- Re-orient bureaucracies to become more sensitive to the issues of the indigenous peoples and provide the more creative ones with opportunities to innovate
- Up-scale isolated successes
- Put resources in the hands of communities that demonstrate capacity and willingness to raise and manage their own resources.