



Intervention of H.E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza  
Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations

**Item 8: Discussion on the theme, “Tenth Anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: measures taken to implement the Declaration”**

New York, April 24, 2017

Madame Chair,

This year’s High-Level Event to mark the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples will be a welcome opportunity for all stakeholders to take stock of the Declaration’s achievements and to assess the remaining challenges.

Two months ago, Pope Francis met in the Vatican with a group representing indigenous peoples from various parts of the world and discussed two aspects of the economic empowerment of indigenous peoples, namely, the right to development and the right to indigenous identity.<sup>1</sup> On various occasions, especially during his visits to Latin America, the Pope has expressed his desire “to be a spokesman for the deepest longings of indigenous peoples” and, in pleading for respect for indigenous peoples, to raise greater public awareness about the fact that indigenous peoples continue to be “threatened in their identity and even in their existence.”<sup>2</sup>

The Holy See believes that, to promote the true development of indigenous peoples, there must be the harmonization of their right to cultural and social development alongside economic development. This is especially clear when planning economic activities that may interfere with indigenous people’s cultures and their ancestral relationship to the earth and to nature, which, if not managed with mutual respect and due regard to their rights could lead to confrontation and conflict of interests.

These concerns can be addressed through “prior and informed consent”<sup>3</sup> of indigenous peoples for initiatives that affect them, be they government initiatives or private sector projects. “In this regard, the right to prior and informed consent should always prevail, as foreseen in Article 32 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr., Pope Francis, Address to Participants of the III Global Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples’ Forum of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 15 February 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr., Pope Francis, Video message of 6 July 2016, dedicated to praying for the indigenous peoples.

<sup>3</sup> Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 32, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Address to Participants of the III Global Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples’ Forum of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 15 February 2017.

Indigenous communities are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners when large projects affecting their ancestral lands are proposed. As Pope Francis affirmed, for these indigenous communities, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. Hence, they care for it best themselves they remain on their own land. Nevertheless, in various parts of the world, pressure is being put on them to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects that are undertaken without regard for the need to protect nature and to preserve the traditions and cultures of the indigenous peoples who have lived those lands from times immemorial.

The Holy See therefore welcomes those national policies that require consultations with, and the informed consent of, indigenous peoples before development projects in their ancestral lands are approved and implemented.

Moreover, there ought to be development of guidelines and projects that respect indigenous identity. This means recognizing that indigenous communities are a part of the population, whose full participation should be promoted and encouraged at the local and national level, thus preventing their further marginalization and promoting their full integration into society. A lack of respect for indigenous identity is a violation of the spirit and letter of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which demands that no one should be left behind.

Respect for indigenous identity also favors the care for our common home. In fact, indigenous traditions and cultures highlight the important interaction and interdependence of the human person and nature, and features particular care for earth as a nurturing mother. Their approach to nature instils in them a greater sense of responsibility, a stronger sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land. They also have a heightened sense of intergenerational solidarity, as they are genuinely concerned to take care of the environment for the sake of their children and grandchildren.

These deeply ingrained values in indigenous traditions and cultures deserve to be set as examples for all people to protect the environment from further degradation. In this regard, indigenous peoples deserve not only our respect, but also our gratitude and support.

Thank you, Madame Chairman.