

PF/12 Raja 173

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Agenda Item 6:  
" Study on shifting cultivation and the socio-cultural integrity of indigenous peoples"

Intervention by:  
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Thank you, Chairperson, Ladies & Gentlemen

**GRATITUDE**

I wish to express my gratitude to my Permanent Forum member colleagues, Simon William M'Viboudoulou and Bertie Xavier, the two other co-authors of the study on *Shifting Cultivation and the Socio-Cultural Integrity of Indigenous Peoples (E/C.19/2012/8)*, and all who helped this study.

**BASIC FEATURES OF SHIFTING CULTIVATION**

Shifting cultivation is also known as 'swidden cultivation', as 'rotational agriculture', and as 'slash-and-burn cultivation'. It has been defined as a system of cultivation whereby indigenous communities clear and cultivate parts of secondary forests, then leave them to regenerate naturally over fallow periods of medium to long duration. It is a rain-fed form of agro-forestry, and does not generally involve irrigation, or high inputs of capital, or highly technical tools and implements. Traditionally, commercially-produced fertilizers and pesticides were not used.

Shifting cultivation involves the cutting of vegetation, usually excluding the larger trees, in the dry season preceding the rains, after which the cut vegetation is left to dry for a few weeks. This is followed by the burning of the cut and dried vegetation, with the ash acting both as fertilizer and pesticide. With the onset of the first rain of the season, seeds of different species of food, including staple crops, are planted in small holes in the ground with a blunt metallic knife or dibble stick. Harvesting time depends upon the crops.

**REGIONAL & TOPOGRAPHICAL VARIATIONS**

The seasons, and crops, of course, vary from region to region on account of climatic conditions and topography.

**THE INTEGRAL SYSTEMS VERSUS PARTIAL SYSTEMS**

The integral or traditional system with sustainable modes of land and forest use needs to be distinguished from the 'pioneering' or partial systems. Partial systems "reflect predominantly only the economic interest of its participants", while integral systems "stem from a more traditional, year-round, community-wide, largely self-contained and ritually-sanctioned way of life". The study we did was primarily concerned with the integral system.

**SHIFTING CULTIVATION & THE SOCIAL INTEGRITY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

The social, political, cultural and other traditions within societies practicing shifting cultivation include collective and consensual modes of political decision-making and social dispute resolution, as well as community collaboration and safety-net systems. Such traditions are also

followed in crucial decision-making processes in the political, juridical and social spheres. Customary law-oriented justice systems use arbitration, mediation and rehabilitation, making justice more accessible and affordable, than in the case of mainstream justice systems.

Although gender-bias in political and social decision-making processes is also present in varying degrees among swidden societies, traditionally, such systems were far less gendered than among societies that have forsaken their traditional systems. Social hierarchies are generally not as sharp in such societies.

#### **SHIFTING CULTIVATION & THE CULTURAL INTEGRITY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

Swidden communities' music, dance, literature, religion and spirituality have all been shaped by the cropping cycle and their interaction with nature; and living beings. Dances commemorate hunting and worship of gods and spirits; ballads recount history, myths and legends; and stories of valour, love and romance are often combined with humour. Shamans write the formulae for their traditional medicine in parchments or pass them on to disciples through oral transmission.

#### **SHIFTING CULTIVATION, CONSERVATION & BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**

Spiritual traditions are shaped by patterns of cultivation and the cycles of nature. Often there are taboos against the fouling of rivers and streams, and other ways of preserving watersheds and other fragile micro-ecosystems. Areas with high levels of biological diversity often coincide with areas with high linguistic and cultural diversity. The decline of swidden cultivation is often accompanied by the loss of languages, biodiversity, cultural traditions and social norms.

#### **MYTHS & MISINFORMATIONS**

There are some views, including of governments, that hold view that shifting cultivation is a major cause of deforestation, soil erosion and loss of biodiversity. This has resulted in a hostile policy environment, which either discourages shifting cultivation or ignores its existence, such as in many parts of South and Southeast Asia. Methodologically sound research in several countries, including Nepal and Thailand has shown that such views are not based upon correct data and statistics or objective reasoning.

Deconstructing such a view, renowned ecologist and human rights worker from India, Madhu Sarin, says, "Let's not forget that valuable agro-biodiversity has also been created through centuries of human interaction with pristine nature ... one of the major gifts of [shifting cultivation] over the centuries has been this contribution of agro-biodiversity and the indigenous knowledge that produced it"

#### **THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples contains several provisions that are crucial for the protection of the rights of shifting cultivators, including articles 3, 5, 10, 24, 25, 29 and 32. These include (a) the right to maintain and strengthen indigenous peoples' distinct cultural and other institutions and (b) their spiritual relationship with their lands, (c) their right to enjoy their own means of subsistence, (d) their right to engage in their traditional economic activities, and (e) their right not to be removed from their lands without their free, prior and informed consent. Articles 5, 13, 14, 15, 19 and 23 of ILO Convention No. 169 contain similar provisions. ILO Convention No. 107 contains similar provisions, supplemented by Recommendation No. 104, read with the provisions of Convention No. 107.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

More detailed recommendations of this study are contained in the report (E/C.19/2012/8) addressed to this Forum, to governments, UN agencies, academic institutions, indigenous peoples and non-governmental organization. In summary, the following are among the most important.

- For the **Permanent Forum** to organize seminars, workshops and other meetings on the different aspects of shifting cultivation related to the socio-cultural identity and integrity of indigenous peoples, including at its 12th session.
- For **UN Member States** to (a) expressly acknowledge the rights of shifting cultivators to their lands; (b) recognize this mode of cultivation as a traditional occupation that requires protection; (c) delineate the lands concerned; (d) discontinue sedentarization programmes that coerce shifting cultivators to forsake this mode of cultivation without their free, prior and informed consent.
- For **UN Agencies**, including FAO, IFAD, ILO, UNEP, UNESCO, UNITAR, UN-Women and the World Bank, to recognize the importance of this mode of cultivation to the identity and integrity of indigenous peoples and to take corrective measures to eliminate discriminatory attitudes and practices against indigenous peoples and communities who indulge in this form of cultivation.