



United Nations Environment Programme

برنامج الأمم المتحدة للبيئة · 联合国环境规划署
PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT · PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE
ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ



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STATEMENT

by

UNEP New York Office

to the

First meeting of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

UNHQ, New York
13-24 May 2002



Thank you,

On behalf of the United Nations Environment Programme, I would like to thank the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and indigenous people represented in this room for having contributed to bring into fruition the first meeting of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

As your attention is now focusing on the review of the activities of the United Nations system relating to indigenous people and the need to set out the future work of the new body, UNEP would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to highlight from our perspective the environmental challenges and risks affecting indigenous peoples as well as their unique potential contribution in providing needed innovative solutions to environmental sustainability.

We see the establishment of the Forum as a major step forward in renewing the meaning of Chapter 26 of Agenda 21. The forum gives impetus to the United Nations to implement measures supportive of indigenous people's rights and sustainable development in a more energetic and coherent manner.

From the beginning, UNEP found a natural constituency among indigenous peoples. Most indigenous cultures are based on a profound respect for nature and their consumption patterns and lifestyles are premised on the principle of sustainability. The concept of protected areas is intrinsic to most of the indigenous peoples systems. The cultural landscapes of indigenous peoples were established thousands of years before the concept of sustainable development was promoted. Many traditional communities have developed detailed natural resources regulations, enforced by a strong system of social, moral and sometimes economic sanctions with the objective of preserving these resources for the existing community and for future generations.

One paradox affecting indigenous issues is that while interest in indigenous peoples, ecological knowledge and resources management practices is increasing, human cultural diversity is eroding at an accelerating rate as the world becomes more biologically poor and culturally uniform.

Many examples illustrate the cultural, economic, health and environmental vulnerability of indigenous peoples and demonstrate that they have been the victims rather than the beneficiaries of economic development. One main reason for hope to change this situation is to start perceiving indigenous peoples as a source of solutions in achieving the goals of sustainable development.

In this context, and as our attention is now focusing on the preparation of the upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development to be held in Johannesburg from August 24 to September 4, 2002, I would like to underline the relevance of the dialogue paper that was



presented by representatives of the indigenous people during PREPCOM II in New York (20 January to 8 February 2002). The paper identifies a number of issues that the WSSD needs to address in order to protect the interests of indigenous people. Some of the problems relate to the intensifying pressures on indigenous lands. The negative effects of globalization such as unsustainable mining practices and the building of large dams are the reasons cited for the deteriorating situation of indigenous communities. The need to focus on human rights and land rights also figure among the issues mentioned during PREPCOM II.

UNEP has already contributed to address these concerns by integrating these issues in its policy development and programme implementation, particularly in the following areas:

Land and Soil

Farmers in many parts of the world use indigenous soil and water conservation practices as an integral part of their farming systems. The importance of the collection, analysis and exchange of information about indigenous knowledge is reflected not only in the provisions of the Convention to Combat Desertification, and in particular its article 16 (g) on scientific and technical cooperation, but also in the programme of work of the Committee on Science and Technology set up under the Convention. Prompted by this recognition of the value of such indigenous practices, UNEP is promoting indigenous knowledge through its programme on dryland success stories and through the activities of the Global Environment Facility, such as the project on people, land management and environmental change implemented in collaboration with the United Nations University. The long-term policy for UNEP on land and soil aims at establishing legally binding agreements on soil/land conservation. This is in line with the indigenous peoples' call for international standards to protect their rights. Indigenous groups have also welcomed the findings of the World Commission on Dams.

Biodiversity

UNEP's work related to the conventions enlisted the views of indigenous communities. The Global Biodiversity Forums as well as the adaptation strategies related to climate change provide the possibility for partnerships with indigenous groups in order to enhance the capacity of indigenous organisations. The recent 6th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (7-19 April, The Hague) has adopted an outline composite report on the "status and trends regarding the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity as a basis for proceeding with the first phase of information gathering and reporting"; and has requested the Convention's Executive Secretary to use the information contained in the report to support further advancement of the programme of work on Article 8(j) and related provisions of the Convention; and to ensure the full and effective participation of indigenous and local communities in the completion of the report, through, *inter alia*, the organization of regional workshops and encourages Parties and Governments to hold national workshops.



Also, the UNEP book entitled "Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity" continues to be of interest to sustainable development practitioners and indigenous groups, whilst UNEP/GEF biodiversity projects continue to encourage indigenous people's participation, for example in the ongoing Kenyan Lake Baringo Community-based Land and Water Management Project.

These commitments and efforts are a major political advance but the situation of indigenous knowledge in the modern world remains highly precarious. While scientific and commercial interest in the ecological knowledge and resources management practices of indigenous peoples is growing, the traditional knowledge of these peoples is under threat. Once the traditional knowledge or genetic materials leave the society in which they are embedded, there is little national protection and virtually no international law to protect community "knowledge, innovation and practices".

Health

UNEP's work on health and the environment has established natural links with the indigenous peoples' livelihoods. Local knowledge is a pillar of traditional medicine and health systems. 75 per cent of the world's plant-based pharmaceuticals have been derived from medicinal plants found in tribal areas. The annual market value of drugs derived from medicinal plants discovered, developed and passed from generation to generation by indigenous people exceeds \$43 billion. Nevertheless, little has been done to protect and maintain the traditional knowledge of these medicines. In December 1999, UNEP, WHO and the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School, launched the project "Biodiversity: its importance to human health". The results of this study, which will compile state of the art knowledge about the importance of other species to human health, will be presented to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg

Civil Society strategy

The UNEP Civil Society/NGO strategy aims at enlisting the participation of all major groups in the consultations and civil society forums that are being held prior to UNEP Governing Council sessions, keeping in mind the key role played by indigenous organizations. During all the civil society fora held since Malmö in May, 2000, the indigenous communities have been invited to participate and voice their concern. There were a number of representatives from the indigenous communities in the Latin American region at the civil society forum in Cartagena this past February. During the Global Ministerial Environment Forum in Cartagena, the Nobel peace prize recipient Rigoberta Menchu addressed the world's environment ministers. Ms. Menchu also held a separate meeting with representatives of indigenous NGOs.



Further steps

While the current policy orientation provides room for engaging indigenous people in UNEP's work, I would like, in conclusion, to highlight for the attention of the Forum the following areas on which further efforts are needed:

1. Exploring how environmental and human rights principles can be strengthened and mutually reinforcing. The UN Commission on Human Rights, noting the forthcoming WSSD, adopted decision 2001/111, which for the first time addressed the link between environment and human rights. The decision invited the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Executive Director of UNEP to organize an international seminar to review and assess progress achieved since UNCED in promoting and protecting human rights in relation to environmental questions and in the framework of Agenda 21. The result and outcomes of this seminar are available on the UNHCHR website (www.unhchr.ch/environment).
2. Capacity building of indigenous communities in natural resource management.
3. Compilation of information on sustainable livelihood practices of indigenous communities for dissemination also to non-indigenous communities.
4. Involvement of indigenous communities in UNEP's sustainable production consumption policy development and in matters relating to trade and environment.
5. Focused consultations with indigenous groups on our policy work as well as the work related to early warning and assessment.
6. UNEP's initiatives on environment and ethics and the dialogue among civilisations have involved the indigenous groups in soliciting their inputs. UNEP's side event during WSSD on this theme will include participants from the indigenous communities.
7. UNEP's work on sustainable tourism, mining and other activities of its Division on Technology, Industry and Economics provide venues for concrete collaboration with indigenous organizations.
8. The UNEP Governing Council decision GCSSVII/5 on Civil Society, adopted in Cartagena, specifically includes the indigenous people as a group that should have enhanced engagement in UNEP's work. An inventory of civil society engagement UNEP-wide has been initiated. This inventory, together with a study of the practices of various UN agencies in involving civil society organisations, including the indigenous groups, will pave the way for furthering our partnership with the indigenous groups.

To address effectively these issues will require listening to indigenous and traditional leaders who have become effective leaders in the environment and human rights movement and also to relearn the ecological knowledge and sustainable principles that our societies have lost. We look forward to listening to the forum and to cooperating with you to set out the future work of this long awaited new body.

Thank you.

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