

Declaration of the International Symposium

“Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations: From the Experience of the First Delegates to the Empowerment of the Younger Generations”

September 13, 2013
Salle XVI, Palais des Nations,
Geneva, Switzerland

- 1 Indigenous Nations and Peoples participants to the 1977 International NGO Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas, the 1981 Conference on Indigenous Peoples and the Land and youth participants from the seven global geopolitical regions participated in the Symposium “On the Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations: from the Experience of the First Delegates to the Empowerment of the Younger Generations”, which has taken place in the Palais des Nations, 10 to 13 September 2013.
- 2 The Symposium participants recalled the principal reasons for turning to the United Nations, evaluated progress made internationally and focused on reaching the objectives of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the Declaration). The dialogue between elders and youth and between civil society, Indigenous Nations and Peoples addressed the issues of women, children, environment, role of Non-governmental organizations, spirituality, the UN and treaties.
- 3 The Symposium proceedings and a film created by Indigenous youth will be distributed at the United Nations High Level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly, to be known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (WCIP) that will take place at the United Nations (UN) in New York in September 2014, and also within Indigenous communities.
- 4 The first Indigenous delegates to the UN recalled their initial instructions provided by their elders and in Indigenous ceremonies, which determined that they must come to the international arena to seek justice, respect and recognition of our Indigenous Nations and Peoples.
- 5 The participants value the advances made to recognize and promote Indigenous Peoples’ rights within the UN system. Also, they realize that there are many difficulties in the implementation of the Declaration and international instruments, particularly in situations where Indigenous Peoples are currently struggling against the extraction of renewable and non-renewable resources on their lands, mega-projects such as hydroelectric dams, and the continuous destruction of language and culture.
- 6 Indigenous Nations and Peoples have faced and continue to face discrimination against their collective and individual rights. In order to overcome this situation, the participants reaffirm that the inherent and inalienable right of self-determination is preeminent and is a requirement for the realization of all rights.

7 As a result of the four-day symposium and focus on the above mentioned issues, the Indigenous representatives present made note of the following matters:

Indigenous Women

8 The representatives gathered hereby acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Indigenous women in the overall struggle of Indigenous Nations and Peoples at all levels—local, regional and international. Noting that Indigenous women have served in key international positions, which positively influenced the rights of Indigenous Peoples, they recognize that the stories of such significant contributions must be told, remembered, and used as an inspiration to the future generations of Indigenous Nations and Peoples. It was stressed that there has been a consistent lack of basic respect for and direct participation of Indigenous women in decision-making processes and, therefore, Indigenous Nations and Peoples collectively as well as the UN system must ensure gender and youth equity in the representation and organizing of all matters concerning Indigenous Nations and Peoples at the local, national, regional, and international level.

9 Building on the momentum of the preparatory process leading to the UN World Conference on Indigenous Peoples 2014, the participants welcome and support the upcoming World Conference of Indigenous Women scheduled to take place in Lima, Peru, 28 to 30 October 2013. They encourage the UN system and its member states to give serious attention to the outcomes of this conference.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

10 The representatives gathered hereby acknowledge the extraordinary contribution of the non-governmental organizations to the historical first conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations of the Americas in 1977 and the 1981 International NGO Conference on Indigenous Peoples and the Land. Moreover, they acknowledge the support of such NGOs for the work of Indigenous Nations and Peoples in the early days of the dialogue concerning the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Also, they draw attention to the historical emergence, contributions and significant role that Indigenous Peoples NGOs have made to advance the rights of Indigenous Nations and Peoples.

11 Indigenous and non-indigenous NGOs play a vital role in monitoring and mobilizing the UN system to address Indigenous Nations and Peoples issues. Yet, in light of the present and various challenges facing Indigenous Nations and Peoples, there is a need to renew, reconstruct, and reconstitute the role and place of non-Indigenous NGOs as support organizations. In this regard, there is a need to respect and recognize the rights and the primary role of Indigenous Nations and Peoples on Indigenous issues to guide the relevant work of non-Indigenous NGOs and to ensure genuine partnership.

12 In the course of all of their work, Indigenous Nations and Peoples and non-Indigenous NGOs must uphold reciprocal relationships and maintain their integrity, good faith, and ethics consistent with the protocols, principles, and individual and collective rights of Indigenous Nations and Peoples.

Environment

- 13 Indigenous Peoples' ways of life have sustained and maintained their diverse cultures and Indigenous worldviews, and they are crucial to the efforts of all of humankind to safeguard the planet.
- 14 The participants acknowledge and underscore the fact that Indigenous Nations and Peoples and all humanity have reached a critical point in the state of the natural world and the survival of our species. There is an urgent need to recognize the sacred role of water for Indigenous Nations and Peoples as well as all other elements on Mother Earth that sustains us.
- 15 Indigenous Peoples must recognize the historical and contemporary experiences of pressure by States and other external, powerful forces upon Indigenous Nations and Peoples in relation to our lands, territories, and resources. These forces have too often resulted in environmental degradation that adversely impacts us all.
- 16 Drawing on the "Follow-up report on Indigenous Peoples and the right to participate in decision-making, with a focus on extractive industries" (A/HRC/21/55), we lay emphasis on the principle of permanent sovereignty, which is an integral part of the right of self-determination of Indigenous Peoples and the "recognition of Indigenous Peoples permanent sovereignty over lands, territories and resources are a prerequisite for meaningful political and economic self-determination of Indigenous Peoples (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2004/30, para. 8)". Accordingly, we acknowledge the need for a deeper conversation among Indigenous Nations and Peoples, UN system and member States about natural law, state law, Indigenous human rights, rights of mother earth and Indigenous ways of life.

Spirituality

- 17 The participants collectively and individually recognize the sacredness of Mother Earth, the Cosmos, all living things and elements that have sustained Indigenous Nations and Peoples.
- 18 It is crucial for all others to know that for Indigenous Nations and Peoples spirituality is distinct from western conceptions of religion and that their spirituality is their way of life – their distinct and profound relationship with the natural world and their lands, territories, sky and resources are of utmost value to them. The solemnity of these relations must be maintained. Furthermore, it must be recognized that the value of Indigenous ceremonies and ways of life are directly linked to all other expressions and manifestations of the Indigenous world and, therefore, are not negotiable and are not up for sale or exploitation.
- 19 The participants challenge the UN system and member states to recognize and respect the applicability and relevance of the distinctive spiritual relationship Indigenous Nations and Peoples hold with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources, and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard. They further call on the UN and its member States to be mindful of the impact of space intervention and its impact on Indigenous Peoples spiritual relation with the universe.

UN work

20 The participants acknowledge and hope to continue to build upon the numerous successes of Indigenous Nations and Peoples and in particular, in the field of UN human rights standard setting, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the ongoing jurisprudence emanating from the human rights treaty bodies. They hope that these international instruments provide substantive direction to Indigenous youth worldwide in their work toward re-defining and improving the relationships between Indigenous Nations and Peoples and others, including nation-states. The Declaration provisions ought to be used as pivotal guidelines in such efforts.

21 The participants stress the following steps Indigenous Nations and Peoples should take to implement the Declaration in their local communities

- Indigenous Nations and Peoples should adopt the Declaration.
- Include the Declaration in the Constitutions of Indigenous Nations and Peoples.
- Work to have the domestic, regional, state or provincial government support and endorse the Declaration.
- Consider an Implementation Act at the national or federal level.
- Utilize all relevant parliamentary or governmental committees.
- All schools and colleges should teach the Declaration and include in their curriculum.
- Persistently educate Indigenous Peoples on the Declaration at the local level.
- Advocate for corporations and business enterprises, operating or seeking to operate in Indigenous territories, to endorse the Declaration and operate in accordance with its principles.

22 The participants underscore the need for Indigenous Peoples to take an integrated or holistic view of the UN and thereby engage the numerous other UN agencies, including those related to environment, development, security, women, children, and cultural development. In all areas of the UN work, they further underscore the urgent need for Indigenous knowledge, values, practices, customs, and institutions to be recognized and respected in relation to all matters affecting humankind.

23 Furthermore, the Declaration and the documents from the Symposium should be presented in parallel events during the sessions of the Permanent Forum and the Expert Mechanism. Also the participants to the Symposium encourage Indigenous Peoples in partnership with international supporters to ensure another reunion in the near future.

24 The participants draw the attention of the UN system to recognize the human rights violations perpetuated against numerous Indigenous human rights defenders, many of whom gave the supreme sacrifice of life or remain in prison for their actions to defend Indigenous Peoples rights and or Mother Earth. They denounce the criminalization of Indigenous Peoples human rights defenders and demand the liberty of all political prisoners worldwide. They draw specific attention to the demand for Clemency of Leonard Peltier, an Indigenous political prisoner in the United States of America.

Treaties

25 The participants hold that if nations cannot keep their word and have a moral stand, rather than an economic stand, then Indigenous Peoples will certainly not all survive. They recall that

Indigenous Nations and Peoples came to the United Nations to talk about treaties, agreements and constructive arrangements among Indigenous Nations and Peoples and States.

26 For every inherent treaty right, there is a Declaration right. The participants urge the UN to develop a mechanism to advance the Declaration to Convention, as noted in Mr. Martinez Cobo's monumental Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations (Document E/CN.4/Sub.2/1986/7/Add.4).

Call to our Indigenous youth and future generations

27 The participants call upon their Indigenous youth, the next generation of Indigenous right defenders, to rescue their oral histories, not only of those who first came to the UN, but also the respectable struggles in their local communities. They call on their youth and the future generations to assume a commitment to continue the international struggle they initiated in 1977.

28 The participants hand over to their youth and future generations the goal of Self-Determination in accordance with the true spirit and intent of their treaties.