

# Statement by IFAD President to Roundtable at the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples

I am honoured to join you for this very important discussion. As a United Nations agency and an international financial institution that invests in rural people and empowers them to build a better future, IFAD takes the rights of indigenous peoples very seriously. There are many reasons for this, but today I would like to share with you two of the major ones.

First, there is the simple matter of equality. Today, many of the world's indigenous peoples and communities still struggle to preserve their identity, culture, land and resources – despite the real progress they have made. Too often, indigenous peoples are still neglected by development efforts or vulnerable to discrimination. Consider that the world's 370 million indigenous people make up just 5 per cent of our population but 15 per cent of those living in poverty are indigenous people.

Which brings me to the second, even more critical reason for IFAD's commitment to the rights of indigenous peoples: Their economic and social empowerment is a prerequisite for the kind of sustainable development that can transform struggling rural areas into thriving communities. Unless we mainstream the rights of indigenous peoples, unless we are serious about their empowerment, unless we work with them as equal partners – then any global development agenda we conceive will be a hollow exercise, empty because it will not reach the most disadvantaged of the world's population.

To eliminate rural poverty and ensure food and nutrition security, we need inclusive processes, inclusive actions and inclusive, sustainable results on the ground. This is what the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples demands of us – particularly its provision on their “full and effective participation in all matters that concern them.” It is also why IFAD's own Policy on Engagement with Indigenous Peoples supports the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous communities on development initiatives that are intended to benefit them, or that might affect them in any way.

Of course, a policy doesn't mean much unless it is matched by financial resources. To put it more bluntly: let's put our money where our mouth is. At IFAD, we are trying to do just that. To date, we have financed a total of about US\$1.8 billion in loans and some \$38 million in grants for projects benefitting indigenous peoples. In the past decade, around 20 per cent of IFAD's lending to our member countries has reached indigenous women and men in rural areas, mainly in Asia and Latin America.

Now let me be clear: Meaningful engagement is not just about funding, and it does not come easily. It takes a lot of work, starting at the grassroots. I know there are many things that IFAD and the governments we finance can do to improve our approach. Still, as our partnership with indigenous peoples has evolved, they have gained greater control over their own development.

In 2007, we set up at IFAD the [Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility](#) to directly fund small projects that are designed and managed by the indigenous communities themselves. Representatives of indigenous peoples' institutions make up a majority of its governing board, and indigenous peoples' organizations co-manage the facility at the regional level.

Another important step was the creation of the [Indigenous Peoples Forum](#) at IFAD, a vehicle for an improved institutional dialogue with indigenous peoples and their organizations. Its first global meeting took place last year, and it will convene again in February of 2015. The forum inspires us and keeps us accountable. It helps us improve the relevance and effectiveness of our work. It reminds us to live up to our policy on engagement with indigenous peoples – a policy that

underscores the particular need to engage with indigenous women. This is key, because empowering women is one of the best ways to fight hunger and poverty.

So while we have come a long way, while we have some way to go, I think IFAD has demonstrated its commitment to indigenous peoples' rights. In fact, that commitment extends directly to this World Conference. An IFAD grant has enabled indigenous peoples' representatives to come to New York and join these discussions. In the coming months, we will also support the dissemination of the World Conference outcome document and foster dialogue on its implementation in six priority countries.

At the same time, we will support capacity-building for indigenous peoples themselves – and their organizations – to carry out the action points in the document. And IFAD is committed to mainstreaming the rights and priorities of indigenous peoples in the post-2015 sustainable development agenda.

Let me take a moment to talk about what I believe is really at stake here.

In many indigenous peoples' cultures, the earth itself is female – a mother-goddess or Mother Earth who sustains us through the bounty of the land. Indigenous peoples have learned to value and conserve those gifts. They have much to teach us about how to live, how to work and how to cultivate in an environmentally sustainable manner that does not jeopardize future generations.

But today, the planet is dangerously out of balance. As Pedro Tzerembo of the Shuar people in Ecuador told the Indigenous Peoples Forum at IFAD last year: "Mother Earth is shedding blood. The sacred plants are dying. We have to protect the land and our children."

In the end, advancing the rights of indigenous peoples is not just a matter of justice or equality. Nor is it something that the member states of the United Nations owe to indigenous communities in the name of implementing our policy declarations. In the end, we owe it to ourselves – to humankind – to respect indigenous peoples' rights. The right to the gifts of nature – the right to clean air, the right to water, the right to land, and the right to freedom!

Let us follow their lead in the responsible stewardship of land and natural resources. This may be our best hope of healing the wounds of Mother Earth.

I wish you the best during these deliberations.

Thank you.

*New York, 22 September 2014*