

**The Impact of Development Projects on Indigenous Women**  
15<sup>th</sup> Session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples  
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Submitted by Tia Oros, Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples

Madam Chair. Warm and respectful greetings to you, the other distinguished EMRIP experts, and the honorable delegates here today. Thank you for the honor to contribute to this dialogue on Indigenous women and development from my experience and perspective on North American Indigenous women.

One of our great leaders, Tonya Gonnella Frichner of the Onondaga Nation, said, Mother Earth is a Relative, not a Resource. Her eight potent words highlight **Indigenous Peoples' enduring interconnectedness with the Earth**. Now with the Ancestors, Tonya mentored many of us, particularly women, throughout the Indigenous World on issues and strategies for empowerment through human rights. Her sister asked that Tonya's perspective be brought into this dialogue to construct an empowering, relationship-based matrix, for our considerations about development, its impacts, and its potentiality as regenerative and life-affirming.

I speak on behalf of the Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples, a non-governmental organization dedicated to Indigenous Peoples' self-determination that supports culturally-rooted community initiatives through advocacy, capacity building, grantmaking, and leadership development.<sup>1</sup> I am also here with the mandate from North American Indigenous women leaders from a diversity of Nations and lived experiences. Women who walk within the prayers of their Ancestors, and who have dynamic ideas and strategies about what it means, and what it takes, to secure a sacred birthright for future generations.

They are grandmothers in villages expressing their inherent sovereignty through customary laws, and frontline land and water protectors on unceded, and treaty lands, unwavering in their right of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent. They are educators and policy makers who engage their Peoples' deeply embedded ancestral ways of knowing and being, to **design culturally and ecologically harmonious development** frameworks that sustain, not drain, the People or landscape on which their traditions and livelihoods rely.

These matriarchs remind us **we are in a time of prophecy – foretold generations ago** of a disjointed, imbalanced world, marked by unrelenting greed and the commodification of Life. We recognize this era through Aquacide<sup>2</sup> - polluted undrinkable waters, and Ecocide - as birds drop from burning skies across the globe, and climate chaos, social upheaval, and pandemics ruining lives. Indigenous Peoples identified COVID as an early indicator, and it cuts deeply. Generations of heartbreak, stress, and grief; malnourishment, lack of access to clean water or traditional foods and medicines, inadequate health care and related co-morbidity factors led to 1 in 390 Indigenous People in the U.S. dying of the virus in 2020. By June 2022 that number reached 1 in 219 fatalities.<sup>3</sup>

**What anguish happens to the Earth echoes in Indigenous women's bodies.** Environmental assaults ripple in brutality against Indigenous women. In the U.S., of Indigenous Peoples' original 2.3-billion-acre land base, they now have only 2.3% of that from which to scrape out a living and build for their futurity. Dispossession and accelerated **targeting of Indigenous lands for extreme resource exploitation leads**

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<sup>1</sup> [www.7genfund.org](http://www.7genfund.org) (founded in 1977)

<sup>2</sup> Tia Oros, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>

**to more violence against Indigenous women by non-Native predation**, now at a rate of 97%<sup>4</sup>, and increased trafficking through man camps – a keystone of the extractive-industry's resource consumption infrastructure where high concentrations of non-Native male laborers are brought into Indigenous territories to take all they can, and they do. This devouring of Indigenous women – the embodiment of the Earth herself – has been suffered for centuries since first invasion, and continues, now known as the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and girls (MMIWg).

Reservation, rural, and urban-based **Indigenous women have meager access** to economic opportunities. Financially, they have been forced for generations to strain under dependency and further to the crevices of existence with colonially constructed race and gender-based economic discrimination. In the U.S., Native women, including those with advanced academic degrees, are paid an average of 40% less than white men, and 24% less than white women<sup>5</sup>. This widening pay gap reinforces economic inequities and perpetuates social oppressions.

**Indigenous women-centered development praxis builds** on four integrated pillars for vitality - social, cultural, spiritual, and ecological. This dynamic deep development, rooted to place and relationship to the Earth, centers individual, family, and community quality-of-life improvement, with a consciousness for the well-being of future generations, not motivated by expansion as a goal.

#### **Healthy food systems development.**

*K'yaky'kyali:kwe Demak'oha A:tsitda* are revitalizing critically needed food systems through innovation, adaptation, and traditional knowledge. Reflecting on the state of the Zuni River after many thirsty decades due to Non-native damming, and the cultural elements associated with nutrition and well-being, these A:shiwí mothers and grandmothers know the holistic health benefits of cultural relationships to wetland sites, sustenance, and traditional farming. They are coordinating family and community scale food development in right relation to Pueblo defined land use practices, with respect to water, and by honoring all other life forms they know and recognize as life-affirming and regenerative through a matrix of spiritual and cultural relationships evolved over a millennia in that high desert region.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Socio-cultural development.**

In Humboldt County, in northern California, where Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples is headquartered and where the Puhlik People are related to the bear, salmon, and redwood tree, environmental devastation by gold mining and timber destruction directly corresponds with Indigenous women and girls' dehumanization.<sup>7</sup> They have narrowly survived nearly two centuries beginning with the early man-camp terrorization which still scar the People and the landscape. A 120-year regional survey (1900 to 2020) revealed that 1 in 5 of the state's MMIW cases were in Humboldt County, with 87% occurring since 1980.<sup>8</sup> Protecting their daughters and nieces from kidnapping and sexual exploitation forced Puhlik-lah coming of age ceremonies into decades of near silence. While the danger continues today, there is also now a rebirth

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<sup>4</sup> <https://bostonreview.net/articles/what-will-it-take-to-end-violence-against-native-women> and

<https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/violence-against-american-indian-and-alaska-native-women-and-men>

<sup>5</sup> Jasmine Tucker, "Native American Women Need Action That Closes the Wage Gap," National Women's Law Center (September 2021), <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Native-Women-Equal-Pay-2021.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Idiwanan An Chawe Theater, Zuni, New Mexico.

<sup>7</sup> Chisa Oros-Harry, 2016. "The role of Fort Humboldt during the California gold rush: a focus on local indigenous women's struggle, resistance and resilience." <https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/hh63sx909?locale=en>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.times-standard.com/2020/08/23/2588961/>

and reclaiming of the *Chpurowok* – the prayers of first menses,<sup>9</sup> as the Puhlik-lah rebuild their dance houses, and raise up their voices, songs, ceremonies, and healing for girls' welcome into womanhood.

### **Ecologically-sound development.**

Led by Dakota women, the Standing Rock Sioux Nation is deepening its commitment to self-determination through renewable energy development with the creation of the Anpetu Wi Wind Farm. The reservation is located in one of the most desolate places in the U.S. which has led the Dakota to endure generations of forced government dependency for basic human needs, the hardship of a 70% unemployment rate, and a 40% poverty rate. Their Great Plains homelands also hold tremendous power in the form of wind, which the Dakota People recognize as a feminine energy. Quoting Anpetu Wi's Chairwoman, Fawn Wasin Zi, the, *Anpetu Wi Wind Farm will be the single largest revenue source for Standing Rock, estimated to nearly double (2x) our community's annual revenue — on its own. We plan to devote these funds to further economic development, reinvesting them into future projects and Standing Rock as a whole ... We will justly transition from fossil fuel dependence and exploitation to self-determination and sustainability.*<sup>10</sup>

**Indigenous women's issues are cross-cutting and their development strategies multi-dimensional.** At this time of prophecy, States, UN entities, and Indigenous Peoples are called on to strengthen Indigenous women-led solutions that are self-determined; created on their own terms, that activate cultural power and which operationalize leadership, innovation, healing, and relationships. We can do more than survive; we can Thrive.<sup>11</sup>

**States and UN entities are called on to listen to and trust the lead of Indigenous women on their perspectives and strategies for any development impacting their peoples, cultures, lands, and territories and to make a full commitment and put into action,** in coordination with EMRIP, relevant UN bodies, Indigenous Peoples' mechanisms, Indigenous nations, and Indigenous-led NGO's to:

- **Mainstream and amplify** Indigenous gender issues and integrate Indigenous women's distinct needs and perspectives comprehensively throughout their programs and policies.
- **Recognize** the overwhelming and detrimental climate and social impacts of mega-industrial development on lands and Peoples and call for a moratorium on the incursion of man camps.
- **Take an active stand against** the targeting and criminalization of, and human rights violations against, Indigenous women land defenders as a violation of their inherent rights and of the UNDRIP.
- **Compile and integrate disaggregated data** on Indigenous women's issues into their programs and reports that includes both qualitative and quantitative and taking into account cultural, social, and economic differences.
- **Engage Indigenous women experts'** full and effective participation on issues across their portfolios, action plans, programming, in decision making and policy making, and staffing.
- **Standardize implementing** the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in full spirit and intention, without subverting it under national law or policies.
- **Recognize Indigenous Peoples' right of self-determination** and development on their own terms, including Free, Prior, and Informed Consent.

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Kishan Lara-Cooper, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> <https://anpetuwi.com/>

<sup>11</sup> A/RES/61/295, UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Articles 3, 7, 11, 15, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23, 25, 26, 32, 42, and 43.

