

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THEIR RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

Intervention by Laurentius S. Tsátago Davids at the 20th session of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, held in Geneva from 22 to 26 July 2002.

In Namibia, a country with so many social and economic disparities, the Nama indigenous people of Namibia are still not part of the mainstream economic and social development. Thousands of them are still living in total destitute, impoverished by continuous droughts and subsequent loss of their livestock and the lack of job opportunities in the areas traditionally inhabited by them.

In the face globalisation, education has also become an important tool in the lives of indigenous people, so that they can protect and fight for their rights such the fundamental right of having access to education, to health, to be taught through their mother tongue and to a living wage. Meagre monthly incomes, sometimes lower than US\$10 (at current exchange rate), earned as domestic workers and farm labourers result in parents being unable to keep their children in school. That is how the vicious cycle of illiteracy, semi-literacy and impoverishment continues.

Policies and conventions are important instruments to address the distinct issues that affect the indigenous people. However, a political will and the empowerment of indigenous people to actively participation and decision making in matters that concern them will probably reverse and change this situation for the better.

The lack of vocational and other training facilities in the traditional areas of the indigenous Nama people, that would be supportive of the traditional economic base or activities of the indigenous people, would open the doors of access to development for the Khoekhoe.

It is universally accepted that language and culture are intertwined and language is regarded as the vehicle for cultural transmission. The loss of their language means the loss of their culture and identity. The right to receive schooling at least in the formative years of schooling in the mother tongue would be an important step to help preserve the cultural identity and the language of the Khoekhoe. A concrete example of loss of language and identity is the descendants of the Khoekhoe in South Africa.

The indigenous people still do not have access to the economic and social resources. The economic structure in Namibia should look at employment creation based on the traditional economic basis of the indigenous people. The skills of the indigenous people should be developed to contribute to overall development of the country. Hundreds of Khoekhoe youth emerged annually from the education system, but have nowhere to go. Their only contribution is the escalation of social evils of alcohol abuse, crime, etc.

Indigenous people should be supported, especially in the developing world, to get the opportunity to also participate in the mainstream economic activities of the country. That is the only way in which they would be able to change their own circumstances.