

United Nations World Conference on Indigenous Peoples

Panel on Implementing the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the National and Local Level

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Implementing the rights of indigenous peoples is about fundamental change. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples reminds us of the rights that have been systemically denied at the national level, and it marks a path toward the changes that are needed to bring those rights into the reality of indigenous peoples' lives. The historic adoption of the Declaration in 2007 has been accompanied by important changes in the constitutions, laws, and policies of a number of countries that in one degree or another embrace the rights affirmed in the Declaration and seek to make them operational. But, by and large, throughout the world a great deal more change is required.

In my view, the most formidable obstacle to fully implementing the rights of indigenous peoples is, simply put, ignorance – ignorance among the broader societies and political elites in the countries in which indigenous peoples live. We can indeed celebrate that here at the headquarters of the United Nations, on this day, the representatives of the national governments of the world and others profess commitment to the rights of indigenous peoples. But across the street in this city and around the globe, ignorance abounds about the conditions of indigenous peoples, their aspirations, and the human rights imperatives that compel change.

This ignorance is manifested and perpetuated by popular stereotypes that render indigenous peoples relics of the past amid images of savagery or attitudes of curiosity and romanticism. Here in the United States a prominent example is the use of Native American names and caricatures by professional sports and other teams, such as the appropriation of the pejorative “Redskins” by the professional football team based in the nation's capital. The stereotypical images and attitudes are also present in the mainstream media, such as many saw when CNN aired a story that disparaged and made light of the traditional Maori reception that was given British Prince William when he visited New Zealand earlier this year.

Perhaps most contributing to widespread ignorance of indigenous peoples' realities are the mainstream educational systems, within which those realities have been largely absent or distorted. Within mainstream education, history has regarded colonial and settler patterns as triumphant precursors to modern states, with little attention to the devastating consequences of those patterns for indigenous peoples in both the past and present. Within the dominant historical narrative indigenous peoples have been cast into the roles of the savage or backward foe, of an obstacle to be overcome, or, alternatively, as the unwitting noble savage destined to succumb to modernity.

In the Outcome Document that was adopted by consensus this morning, UN members states renew their affirmation of the rights enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and express deepened commitment to the

implementation of those rights. But even if we accept the sincerity of the expressions by member states to advance deliberately with steps to implement indigenous peoples rights – and I for one do – those steps will be hobbled by the ignorance they must confront. The political will that is necessary to the change that implementation requires can hardly take hold if majority societies are ignorant of the realities of indigenous peoples that justify the change.

The commitment to implement the rights of indigenous peoples must therefore carry with it programs of education and awareness raising that reach throughout society. Education about indigenous issues and realities must be mainstreamed into state primary and secondary educational systems. The media should be encouraged, and should itself adopt specific programs, to become educated about indigenous peoples in relation to contemporary events. And government authorities at all relevant levels should be made aware of how their functions touch, and should touch, upon indigenous peoples lives. In all these educational and awareness raising efforts the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples itself can be an instructional tool. Finally, indigenous peoples themselves should be invited, and be prepared, to contribute to all such educational and awareness raising efforts, in the spirit of reconciliation, partnership, and commitment to the human rights of all that is represented by the Declaration.