

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 The delegates from Indigenous Nations and Peoples who participated in 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, partook in the Symposium “Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations: from the Experience of the First Delegates to the Empowerment of the Younger Generations”, which took place in the Palais des Nations from 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, as well as between civil society and Indigenous Nations and Peoples, addressed the issues of women, children, environment, the role of non-governmental organizations, spirituality, the United Nations and treaties.
- 3 The Symposium proceedings and a film made 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), which 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 prerequisite 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 have 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 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 age equity in the representation and organization 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 issues involving Indigenous Nations and Peoples. Yet, in light of the current 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 cultural diversity and Indigenous worldviews, which are crucial to the efforts of all of humankind to safeguard the planet.
- 14 The participants acknowledge and would like to underscore the fact that Indigenous Nations and Peoples, as well as all of 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 other elements of Mother Earth that sustain us.
- 15 Indigenous Peoples must recognize the historical and contemporary experiences of pressure on the part of 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 to self-determination of Indigenous Peoples and the "[r]ecognition of indigenous peoples' permanent sovereignty over lands, territories and resources is 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 dialogue among Indigenous Nations and Peoples, the UN system and Member States about natural law, State law, Indigenous human rights, the rights of Mother Earth and Indigenous ways of life.

Spirituality

- 17 The participants collectively and individually recognize the sacredness of Mother Earth, the Cosmos, and all living things and elements that have sustained Indigenous Nations and Peoples.
- 18 It is crucial for everyone 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. The distinct and profound relationship of Indigenous Nations and Peoples with the natural world and its lands, territories, sky and resources are of the utmost value to them. The solemnity of these relationships 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 available for sale or for exploitation.
- 19 The participants urge the UN system and Member States to recognize and respect the applicability and relevance of the distinctive spiritual relationship that Indigenous Nations and Peoples have with the lands, territories, waters, coastal areas and other resources belonging to them traditionally or that they have occupied and used. They also urge the transfer of their responsibilities to future generations in this regard. They further call upon the UN and its Member States to be mindful of the consequences of space intervention and its impact on Indigenous Peoples' spiritual relationship with the universe.

The work of the United Nations

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 establishing the human rights standards of the United Nations, 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 provisions of the Declaration should be used as pivotal guidelines in such efforts.

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

- Indigenous Nations and Peoples should adopt the Declaration.
- Implement 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 it in their curriculum.
- Persist in educating 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 resulting from the Symposium should be presented in side events during the sessions of the Permanent Forum and the Expert Mechanism. Also, the elders encourage Indigenous Peoples, in partnership with international supporters, to confirm another meeting in the not-too-distant future.

24 The participants also ask the UN system to recognize the human rights violations perpetuated against numerous Indigenous human rights defenders, many of whom have given the supreme sacrifice of life or have remained 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 freedom of all political prisoners worldwide. They ask that particular attention be paid 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 countries cannot keep their word and maintain a moral stance rather than an economic stance, then there is no doubt that not all Indigenous Peoples will 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 right inherent to a treaty, there is a right in the Declaration. The participants urge the UN to develop a mechanism to advance the development of the Declaration to a convention, as noted in Mr. Martínez Cobo's Study on 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 rights defenders, to rescue their oral histories, not only those of the first participants who came to the United Nations, but also those involving the struggles in their local communities. They call on their youth and the future generations to make a commitment to continue the international struggle they initiated in 1977.

28 The participants hand over to their youth and future generations the legacy of continuing the goal of self-determination in accordance with the true spirit and intent of their treaties.