Indigenous Peoples

There are more than 300 million indigenous peoples living in about 70 countries around the world. Most are poor. For a variety of historical and political reasons, many indigenous peoples have been pushed onto the least fertile and most fragile lands in some of the world’s most isolated places. In the Peruvian Andes, the Himalayas and the highlands of Viet Nam, for example, indigenous peoples often live at the highest altitudes, where they face the harshest conditions.

Poverty in mountain regions and other rural areas has a great deal to do with inaccessibility, with the complexity and fragility of mountain environments, and with the extent to which indigenous peoples are marginalized. In the Peruvian Andes, two out of every three households cannot access enough arable land to grow the food required to meet their nutritional needs. Soils in many of these harsh environments are depleted of minerals and micronutrients, thus increasing the risk of vitamin deficiency among those who live there.

Indigenous peoples living in isolated rural environments have few opportunities to improve their lives, to access basic services or to influence the institutions and policies that may change their lives in the future. They are less likely, for example, to have access to roads, schools and health care. Increasingly,
indigenous peoples are also being displaced by outsiders, who come to expropriate and exploit local forests, minerals and water. Few indigenous peoples profit from the resources being taken out. Making matters worse, resource extraction is seldom managed sustainably, leaving indigenous peoples to live in the degraded environments the outsiders leave behind.

**Land and survival**

Land has deep spiritual significance for many indigenous peoples. It is also crucial to their survival. Helping indigenous peoples secure rights to their ancestral territories and the natural resources they harbour is an urgent priority. Some governments have taken steps to give indigenous communities greater security. In India, for example, milestone legislation gives ownership of all non-timber forest products, such as plants, mushrooms, herbs and honey, to the village assembly. It also gives the village the right to manage its land, water and forests. In the Philippines, the government has legislated to recognize the concept of ancestral lands and establish community stewardship agreements for managing forests. These agreements grant indigenous peoples the sole right to cultivate and enjoy the products of the forests, and to allocate the land among themselves in accordance with their own customs.

**A special bond with nature**

The values of many indigenous peoples are based on a close relationship with their surroundings. This link gives them a special role to play as stewards of natural resources and biodiversity. Over generations, for example, many indigenous peoples have acquired a unique and detailed understanding of their environments. Managed sustainably, territories where indigenous peoples live hold considerable economic potential as sources of water, timber and high-value niche products such as medicinal plants, organic foods and hand-woven fabrics. While these kinds of products are increasingly the focus of commercial interest, indigenous peoples are costed to spot the arrival of people who come to exploit the forests, minerals and water. Few indigenous peoples profit from the resources being taken out. Making matters worse, resource extraction is seldom managed sustainably, leaving indigenous peoples to live in the degraded environments the outsiders leave behind.

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indigenous communities rarely receive a fair share of the economic benefits. And possibilities for the future are increasingly diminishing as private companies apply for patents on plants and other resources that have traditionally been used by indigenous peoples.

Legal instruments are needed to prevent the over-extraction of timber, minerals and plants, as well as to protect the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples. Ground-breaking initiatives give some cause for hope. In Kerala, India, for example, when the Tropical Botanical Garden and Research Institute developed a drug from the plant Trichopus zelanicus with help from the local Zani tribe, a licensing agreement was struck that assured 50% of royalties would be put in the hands of the community.

IFAD
The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is a specialized agency of the United Nations dedicated to eradicating poverty and hunger in developing countries. It develops and finances, through low-interest loans and grants, projects that enable rural poor people to overcome poverty themselves. IFAD works with indigenous peoples mainly in Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean. In these regions, IFAD has invested USD 736 million in projects in support of indigenous peoples.

The United Nations declared 1994 to 2004 as the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples. In partnership with indigenous peoples, UN agencies, governments, NGOs and private institutes are working to strengthen international cooperation in human rights, environment, development, education and health.