

Indigenous peoples: valuing, respecting and supporting diversity

Indigenous peoples have rich and ancient cultures and view their social, economic, environmental and spiritual systems as interdependent. They make valuable contributions to the world's heritage thanks to their traditional knowledge and their understanding of ecosystem management. But indigenous peoples are also among the world's most vulnerable, marginalized and disadvantaged groups. We must ensure that their voices are heard, their rights respected, and their well-being improved.

There are more than 370 million self-identified indigenous people in some 70 countries around the world. In Latin America alone there are more than 400 groups, each with a distinct language and culture. But the biggest concentration of indigenous peoples is in Asia and the Pacific – an estimated 70 per cent.

Indigenous peoples have in-depth, varied and locally rooted knowledge of the natural world. And because traditional indigenous lands and territories contain some 80 per cent of the planet's biodiversity, indigenous peoples can play a crucial role in managing natural resources.



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Unfortunately, indigenous peoples too often pay a price for being different and far too frequently face discrimination. Over the centuries, they have been dispossessed of their lands, territories and resources and, as a consequence, have often lost control over their own way of life. Worldwide, they account for 5 per cent of the population, but represent 15 per cent of those living in poverty.

One of the most effective ways to enable indigenous peoples to overcome poverty is to support their efforts to shape and direct their own destinies, and to ensure that they are the co-creators and co-managers of development initiatives.

Promoting universal standards

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted

by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007, establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, well-being and rights of the world's indigenous peoples.

The Declaration addresses individual and collective rights; cultural rights and identity; and rights to education, health, employment and language. It outlaws discrimination against indigenous peoples and promotes their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them. It also ensures their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own priorities in economic, social and cultural development.

The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is observed on 9 August every year.

Championing the rights and aspirations of indigenous peoples

IFAD has more than 30 years of experience working with indigenous peoples. Since 2003, an average of about 22 per cent of IFAD's annual lending has supported initiatives for indigenous peoples, mainly in Asia and Latin America. IFAD empowers communities to participate fully in determining strategies for their development and to pursue their own goals and visions by strengthening grass-roots organizations and local governance.

In the process of working closely with indigenous communities, IFAD has learned that effective and sustainable development must be tailored to their identities, values and cultures.

Enabling indigenous peoples to secure rights to their land and territories is part of IFAD's 'good practice'. Land is not only crucial to the survival of indigenous peoples, as it is for most poor rural people – it is central to their identities. They have a deep spiritual relationship to their ancestral territories. Moreover, when they have secure access to land, they also have a firm base from which to improve their livelihoods.

Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems have a special role to play in the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources. IFAD-supported programmes and projects promote the blending of indigenous knowledge systems with modern technologies for sustainable natural resource management.

IFAD recognizes indigenous women's untapped potential as stewards of natural resources and biodiversity, as guardians of cultural diversity, and as peace brokers in conflict mitigation. Nonetheless, indigenous women are often the most disadvantaged members of their communities because of their limited access to education, assets and credit, and their exclusion from decision-making processes. IFAD-backed projects work to improve these conditions so that women are better equipped to participate in their communities and become successful in their own right.

Stepping up support

Since 2007, IFAD has administered the Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility (IPAF). Through small grants of up to US\$50,000, it supports the aspirations of indigenous peoples by funding microprojects that strengthen their culture, identity, knowledge, natural resources, and intellectual-property and human rights.

In 2009, IFAD adopted its Policy on Engagement with Indigenous Peoples, which defines principles that enhance the effectiveness of programmes and projects. To help translate policy commitments into action, IFAD has established an indigenous peoples' forum that will promote a process of dialogue and consultation among indigenous peoples' organizations, IFAD staff and Member States. The forum will also provide input and recommendations to further guide IFAD's work with indigenous peoples.



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FACTS

- There are more than 370 million self-identified indigenous people in the world, living in at least 70 countries
- Most of the world's indigenous peoples live in Asia
- Indigenous peoples form about 5,000 distinct groups and occupy about 20 per cent of the earth's territory
- Although indigenous peoples make up less than 6 per cent of the global population, they speak more than 4,000 of the world's 7,000 languages
- One of the root causes of the poverty and marginalization of indigenous peoples is loss of control over their traditional lands, territories and natural resources
- Indigenous peoples have a concept of poverty and development that reflects their own values, needs and priorities; they do not see poverty solely as the lack of income
- A growing number of indigenous peoples live in urban areas, as a result of the degradation of land, dispossession, forced evictions and lack of employment opportunities

Indigenous communities manage their own resources in Morocco

When traditional forms of resource management break down, the environment suffers, putting the livelihoods of indigenous peoples at risk. In eastern Morocco the rangeland had rapidly degraded as a result of policies that ignored existing sociocultural and tribal management systems. In these semi-arid steppes, where raising small livestock is the main activity, rangelands had been degraded and areas around water points were overgrazed.

“The eastern region was on its way to becoming a desert,” says Brahim Balhbib, a member of the Ouled Kaddour tribe, who tends a herd of 80 sheep. Today, it has been rehabilitated with the help of the IFAD-supported Livestock and Rangelands Development Project in the Eastern Region.

The project enabled local tribes to manage the land through herder cooperatives, organized according to tribal affiliations and respectful of local knowledge and practices. The cooperatives operated a strict ‘one person, one vote’ system, giving smallholder farmers a role in making decisions and in land management.

The project helped rehabilitate the rangelands and introduced environmental protection measures to ensure sustainability over an area of 460,000 hectares. Plant cover was re-established, and fodder production increased five-fold, from 150 to 800 kilograms of fodder per hectare.

The second phase of the project focused on creating a legal framework to define the roles of tribal institutions and cooperatives, securing common and individual property and use rights over grazing lands, and developing incentives to ensure that the new system of conservation farming was fully supported by local herders.

“Grass and trees are now growing, which is a good thing for the herders,” says Balhbib. “I feel very strongly that we need to protect our natural resources.”



Recovering the right to self-governance in the Philippines

The tribal peoples of northern and central Mindanao in the Philippines make up 10 per cent of the island’s population. They inhabit the environmentally fragile highlands of the island and live in extreme poverty, forced to exploit dwindling resources for food and fuel. Many of these groups do not even have an area of land to call their own.

The IFAD-supported Northern Mindanao Community Initiatives and Resources Management Project helped these tribal groups claim ancestral domain certification for their land and promoted self-governance. Communities now manage their own land and livelihoods, and formulate sustainable development and protection plans to keep illegal loggers and other external commercial interests at bay.

The Higaunon tribe of Claveria Misamis Oriental has reclaimed self-governance after decades of powerlessness. The project helped the tribe revive customary laws and traditions that had long been abandoned. The Higaunon’s tribal council has now been formalized as a local government unit and has the authority to resolve issues within its boundaries.

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LINKS

IFAD and indigenous peoples
<http://www.ifad.org/english/indigenous/index.htm>

IFAD policy on engagement with indigenous peoples
http://www.ifad.org/english/indigenous/documents/ip_policy_e.pdf

Learning by working together: Microprojects financed through the Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility (IPAF)
http://www.ifad.org/english/indigenous/pub/documents/microproyectos_e.pdf

Custodians of culture and biodiversity
<http://www.ifad.org/english/indigenous/pub/documents/biodiversity.pdf>

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/>

United Nations Development Group Guidelines on Indigenous Peoples' Issues
<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/docs/guidelines.pdf>

SARD and indigenous culture
<http://www.fao.org/sard/en/init/964/2687/2453/index.html>

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html>

Indigenous Women's Network
<http://www.indigenouswomen.org/>



IFAD is an international financial institution and a specialized United Nations agency dedicated to eradicating poverty and hunger in rural areas of developing countries.

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"This has been a notable achievement," says Sana F.K. Jatta, IFAD country programme manager for the Philippines. "We have helped the Higaunon reassert their political and legal systems and enabled them to participate in local governance. This is the first example of its kind in the Philippines. We strongly believe that owning and managing their own land and livelihoods is key to the emancipation of these peoples and the sustainability of their way of life."

Reclaiming traditional knowledge: an IPAF project in Peru

Indigenous peoples possess a wealth of highly specialized knowledge about their environment and its natural resources. This traditional expertise is in danger of being eroded or even lost.

An IPAF-funded project – Recovery of Traditional Knowledge on Dietary and Medicinal Biodiversity in Quechua and Asháninka Communities of Peru – collected and collated knowledge of dietary and medicinal plants from the two communities in the Selva Central region. Andean and Amazonian plants – 129 used in 94 specific medical applications – were systematically recorded.

The project, implemented by the Centre for Indigenous Cultures of Peru, also held a series of workshops in the communities on their intellectual property rights. Now men and women leaders of the Quechua and Asháninka communities understand law 27811, which protects their traditional knowledge of biological resources.

Bildar Tovar is an Asháninka woman from the Kivinaki community and is the Amazonian Secretary in the Permanent Workshop of Indigenous Andean and Amazonian Women of Peru. She recognizes that her people need to value, record and safeguard their knowledge.

"When women learned about law 27811, they said it had been a mistake to give away their knowledge so easily," she says. "We have already been planning the first Asháninka botanical garden. It could be another way of recovering our resources, which are being lost. It's a dream that opens up our minds and our spirits."



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