

International Recognition of Indigenous Peoples of the World

Indigenous peoples inhabit large areas of the Earth's surface. Spread across the world from the Arctic to the South Pacific, they number, at a rough estimate, some 300 million people. Indigenous or Aboriginal peoples are so-called because they were living on their lands before others came from elsewhere; they are the descendants—according to one definition—of those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived, the new arrivals later becoming dominant through conquest, occupation, settlement, or other means.



Many indigenous peoples around the world have retained social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics that are clearly distinct from those of the other segments of the national populations.

Throughout human history, whenever dominant neighbouring peoples have expanded their territories, or others from far away have acquired new lands by force, the cultures and livelihoods—even the existence—of indigenous peoples have been endangered. The threats to indigenous peoples' cultures and lands, to their status, and to other legal rights as distinct groups and as citizens do not always take the same forms as in earlier times. Although some groups have been relatively successful, in most of the world indigenous peoples are still actively seeking recognition of their identities and ways of life.

Today, hundreds of representatives of indigenous peoples and their organizations participate in United Nations meetings, in particular those of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Non-governmental organizations with general human rights interests actively contribute to work in the field of indigenous peoples' rights, in addition to supporting indigenous peoples' causes.

In spite of cultural and ethnic diversity, there are often striking similarities between the problems, grievances, and interests of the various indigenous peoples and, therefore, in their presentations to international forums. Participation of indigenous communities and organizations in United Nations meetings has served to highlight these similarities.

It has often been the case—particularly since the emergence of new nations in the wave of decolonization that followed the Second World War—that indigenous peoples insist on retaining their separate identity and cultural heritage. It is now generally admitted that policies of assimilation and integration aimed at bringing these groups fully into the mainstream of majority populations are often counter-productive.

- *Fact Sheet No.9 (Rev.1), The Rights of Indigenous Peoples*

Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights:

www.unhchr.ch/html/menu6/2/fs9.htm#intro

The United Nations recognizes that indigenous peoples all over the world, such as the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada, have been colonized by other nations over the course of many generations. During much of this time, the governments, laws, decisions, and educational systems of other cultures were imposed on them. This process had a serious impact on the cultural identities and independence of indigenous peoples.

In keeping with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the U.N. found it important to recognize that all peoples have the right to define who they are, to govern their communities, to make decisions for themselves, and to be free to maintain and develop their cultures while fully participating in the countries in which they live. The following texts reflect the position of the United Nations on the self-determination of indigenous peoples.



... the fundamental importance of the right of self-determination of all peoples, by virtue of which they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development ...

- from the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 1999

An objective of the Decade [International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, 1995 - 2004] is the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous people and their empowerment to make choices which enable them to retain their cultural identity while participating in political, economic and social life, with full respect for their cultural values, languages, traditions and forms of social organization.

- United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

www.unhchr.ch/indigenous/groups-02.htm