



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission for Social Development

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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and  
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:  
priority theme: strategies for the eradication of poverty to  
achieve sustainable development for all**

**Statement submitted by Dominican Leadership Conference,  
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, and UNANIMA International,  
non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the  
Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

### **Land and the eradication of poverty for Indigenous Peoples**

Land is life for indigenous peoples; it is the key to eradicating poverty, preserving families, and protecting vulnerable members like children, the aged, and the disabled. Preservation of indigenous lands is more than a tool to eradicate poverty, it can actually prevent poverty. As was noted in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, “Convinced that control by indigenous peoples over developments affecting them and their lands, territories and resources will enable them to maintain and strengthen their institutions, cultures and traditions, and to promote their development in accordance with their aspirations and needs.”

Indigenous peoples are mentioned in paragraph 23 in the Introduction to the UN Declaration, Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in the context of “People who are vulnerable must be empowered ... to meet their special needs.” Many of the goals (for example 1-5, 8, 11, 14-15, and 16) are directly applicable to them, as are many targets. For example, in the targets relating to the eradication of poverty, Target 1.4 declares that “All, especially the poor and vulnerable have...control over land...and natural resources,” and Target 1.5 says “Build the resilience of the poor and ... vulnerable ... reduce exposure to ... economic, social, and environmental shocks.”

There are over 370 million indigenous people in 90 countries in all regions of the world. Some countries are particularly rich in their diversity of indigenous people (one country has 247 groups with over 180 indigenous languages). These rich cultures are under threat from multiple factors, such as expanding populations of the dominant culture, environmental destruction, theft of land and resources, and disease. In one instance, over 80% of the indigenous people in a country were wiped out by a single disease.

Loss of land and resources is a major threat to their well-being. Multi-national corporations, ranchers, fishermen, mining and lumber companies are guilty of “land-grabbing” — taking lumber, minerals, precious stones, water, and soil resources for their own use. Even governments can be complicit in such activities. The people also are displaced from their lands by dams, river pollution, deforestation, or from the effects of climate change. Indigenous leaders are often assassinated by military forces, employees of corporations, or guerrillas.

The survival of indigenous peoples and their culture usually depends upon access to their traditional lands and resources. When they are denied access to these, many live in extreme poverty, the children suffer severe malnutrition, families are broken apart, and women are threatened with violence.

Demolition of habitat destroys their means of livelihood, often permanently. For example, many of the indigenous people in South/Central America and Africa depend on forests to sustain a hunter-gatherer way of life. Even if they turn to alternative, less traditional forms of agriculture and convert the forest to grasslands or use westernized methods of agriculture, the thin, nutrient-poor soil cannot support ranching or agriculture for many years, nor can it return to forest within many lifetimes. The inhabitants become mired in multi-generational poverty. The

disappearance of tropical rainforests is also a global environmental tragedy, because of the losses of biodiversity and the world's largest "carbon sink" to control climate change.

Some indigenous people leave the forest or other traditional lands to seek work in cities, often to trade one form of poverty for another. They are marginalized and suffer from discrimination and exploitation by drug traffickers or other criminals. The family structure breaks down as fathers and mothers leave to seek work. The women are more vulnerable to human trafficking and violence; in North America the numbers of missing and murdered indigenous women are proportionally much higher than women in the general population. Children are malnourished, and youth often have no access to education or job training ... and no future. Confused with their identity and values, indigenous youth lose the will to live. In just one example, 17 youth from an indigenous community committed or attempted suicide in one year. Suicide is never acceptable in indigenous culture, and is a sign of great distress in the community.

And their tragedy extends to the other inhabitants of our planet. Indigenous People have much to teach the world about how to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and Targets: for example, how the ocean and the forests "work," and how to maintain genetic diversity. They are already experts in the sustainable use and management of their ecosystems. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People sums it up: "Recognizing that respect for indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment."

#### Practices from the grassroots

Civil society organizations, aware of the urgency of the connection between the displacement of indigenous people and poverty, have created some solutions. For example, the Sisters of Notre Dame work with an organization in Brazil, the Missionary Council for Indigenous Peoples (CIMI). Together they provide education appropriate to the culture of the people, enabling them to preserve their culture and stay in their native villages. Indigenous teachers of the Kaxinawá People in Acre state, Brazil, were taught how to adapt the curriculum content to the reality of their own people; all teachers in the villages are now indigenous and teach classes in their own language. They teach their students an awareness of their human rights and the importance of unity in the common struggle for their rights. The people are able to stay in their villages, thereby avoiding the dangers of migration from the countryside to the cities.

In another example from Brazil, the Carmelite Sisters of Charity of Vedralva have helped organize the Pankararu people in Pernambuco State into "associations" that help them achieve better living conditions, education and health care, access to universities and government programs, legal help, and even help them document land tenure. With these greater opportunities, the Pakararus have also been able to remain in their village.

#### Conclusion

In light of the priority theme for this session "Strategies for Eradicating Poverty to Achieve Sustainable Development for All" it seems that a single, relatively simple approach — making it possible for indigenous people to remain on

their lands — could achieve a variety of goals: preventing poverty in the indigenous populations, preserving the precious indigenous culture and traditions, contributing to more sustainable cities by preventing the mass exodus from the impoverished countryside, and allowing indigenous experts in forest and ocean use/management to share their knowledge with the rest of the world.

It is important to act quickly. We are watching the extinction of the way humans lived before our present culture, with their traditional knowledge of how to live in the world. These cultures and this indigenous knowledge may disappear within our children's lifetimes unless steps are taken to preserve it. And the whole world will be impoverished by its loss.

Recommendations:

We call on the Commission for Social Development to urge Member States:

- (a) To enforce the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Persons.
- (b) To encourage alliances between conservation groups and indigenous peoples.
- (c) To support and mentor organizations of indigenous persons, and provide for training and education appropriate to the circumstances and culture of indigenous peoples.
- (d) To designate clearly the boundaries of indigenous lands to keep the residents from being evicted from their lands.
- (e) To encourage countries to establish and follow constitutional protections for indigenous citizens.
- (f) To find sustainable alternatives to traditional Western methods of agriculture in tropical rain forests, or of aquaculture in oceans and water ecosystems.
- (g) To better regulate governments' and corporations' use of natural resources on indigenous lands.
- (h) To seek ways to protect isolated groups of indigenous peoples from contact with modern culture (there are still about 100 isolated groups in the world). For groups who are not isolated, but are still living their own culture, outside contacts could at least be limited or controlled. Groups who are integrating into the dominant culture could be encouraged to preserve their own culture in the process.