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COMBATting DISCRIMINATION AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

There are around 370 million indigenous persons living in the world today. Of those, there are more than 5,000 distinct groups in more than 70 countries. Although representing 5 per cent of the world's population, indigenous peoples represent 15 percent of the world's poorest people.

Indigenous peoples have in common a historical continuity with a given region prior to colonization and a strong link to their lands. They maintain, at least in part, distinct social, economic and political systems. They have distinct languages, cultures, beliefs and knowledge systems. They are determined to maintain and develop their identity and distinct institutions and they form a non-dominant sector of society.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples does not include a definition of indigenous peoples. According to the Declaration, self-identification as indigenous is considered a fundamental criterion. The Declaration refers to their right to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions.



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Young Salasaca Indians in Ambato, South of Quito, Ecuador

The many challenges faced by indigenous peoples usually includes a denial of their right to control their own development based on their own values, needs and priorities, a lack of - or very poor - political representation and a lack of access to social services. They are often excluded or poorly represented in decision-making processes on matters that directly affect them and are often not consulted about projects affecting their lands or the adoption of administrative or legislative measures which may affect them. Indigenous peoples are often displaced from their ancestral lands as a result of ventures such as the exploitation of natural resources.

An achievement of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action

Many issues raised by indigenous peoples, such as climate change and access to safe drinking water are now more visible at the international level. The United Nations has highlighted the problem of discrimination against indigenous peoples since the first Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination in 1973-1982. This concern led to the establishment in 1982 of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, which articulated their needs and aspirations in a draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Progress on the draft was given further impetus in the Durban Declaration and Program of Action (DDPA). The draft was finally adopted by the General Assembly in September 2007. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples represents one of the main achievements of the DDPA.



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The Declaration acknowledges the basic human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples. It emphasizes, among other things, the right of indigenous peoples to be free and equal; the right to self-determination and to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development; the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs; the right to establish and control their educational systems; the right to participate fully at all levels of decision-making in matters which may affect their rights, lives and destinies; the right to their lands, territories and resources; and the right to be secure in the enjoyment of their own means of subsistence and development.

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has made it clear that discrimination against indigenous peoples is racial discrimination. It has interpreted non-discrimination as the protection of aspects of indigenous cultural identity and language and the offer of economic and social development, effective participation, and rights over lands, territories and resources.

The United Nations has also established three mechanisms for combating discrimination against indigenous peoples. The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was created to advise the UN on issues related to indigenous peoples and specifically to raise awareness and promote the coordination of activities related to indigenous issues within the UN system. The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people has a mandate to gather, request, receive and exchange information on alleged violations of their human rights. The Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provides the Human Rights Council with thematic expertise on the rights of indigenous peoples.

Despite the progress that has been made, achieving significant recognition of, and improvements in, the human rights of peoples who have endured centuries of exploitation and marginalization remains a tremendous challenge for governments and the United Nations system.

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