**United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)**

The 17th Session of the [United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/) (UNPFII) took place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City from April 16-27, 2018. The theme for this year’s Forum was “**Indigenous peoples’ collective rights to lands, territories and resources.**” The forum took a similar format to past meetings, with discussions focused on how to successfully implement mechanisms needed to fully realize the rights of indigenous populations. The debates at this year’s Forum made it clear that there are continuing and significant challenges that indigenous populations face in realizing their cultural rights. However, these challenges are not without potential solutions, some of which are referenced later in this report.

The discussion on the Forum’s theme began with a presentation on the work of the Expert Group Meeting on “[Sustainable Development in Territories of Indigenous Peoples](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/meetings-and-workshops/egm2018.html)”. The presentation and the report itself outlined the importance of ensuring indigenous communities have control over their own lands and territories, as they are closely linked to the achievement of their autonomy, self-determination, sustainability, and sustainable development. The control of land, territories, and resources by indigenous communities is particularly challenged by countries that prioritize economic growth over all other considerations – especially over indigenous livelihoods. Delegates heard how states often attack indigenous people for not contributing, and have been known to fabricate false statistics to make economic contribution of indigenous communities negligible.

The Expert Group Meeting raised many other challenges faced by indigenous peoples. These include the creation by states of racist narratives of indigenous peoples, describing them as savages who have little understanding of the lands and territories. These misconceptions provide ideological justification for states and outside groups to confiscate lands. For example, conservation initiatives and green investments taking place on indigenous land have alienated indigenous populations but are rarely regarded as problematic by governments. Investment treaties signed between states and private investors are often given priority over human rights, stripping indigenous communities of their indispensable collective rights. Delegates heard that the Expert Group Meeting’s 2018 session adopted recommendations focusing on the expression of indigenous self-determination and autonomy, as well as collaborations between stakeholders and indigenous groups in international decision-making processes.

When the discussion on the Forum theme was opened up to indigenous leaders, organizations, and civil society groups, the dialogue focused on the lack of representation of indigenous communities in international forums, violation of cultural rights, land mapping, demarcation, and titling. All of these are issues that have been raised in previous forums, and as far back as 2007, the Permanent Forum concluded that there was an urgent need to protect these rights. Since then, however, land security has not improved, and indigenous people are still being excluded, marginalized, and are facing violence and death while advocating for their rights. Other problems such as mining and trophy hunting continue to threaten indigenous territories and livelihoods by compromising their food sovereignty. Moreover, the active exclusion of bilingual education by some governments has threatened the perpetuation of indigenous heritage.

Some of the solutions to these problems suggested by delegates included:

* Actively protecting indigenous peoples’ rights to own, conserve, and manage their own territories and resources
* Lobbying governments to take effective measures regarding land alienation
* Keeping governments and agencies responsible for taking all necessary measures to ensure indigenous people are not evicted from their lands
* Ensuring governments protect and enforce cultural rights
* Increasing the capacity of elected officials to protect indigenous communities
* Making more use of the rights laid out in the [Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169)

More work also needs to be done to create stronger working partnerships between states and indigenous communities, in order to develop legislative and decision-making processes, as well as ensuring indigenous rights to free, prior and informed consent.

Beyond the debate on the 2018 theme, Forum delegates also reviewed the implementation of the six mandated areas of UNPFII – which are economic and social development, culture, environment, education, health, and human rights – with reference to the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html). A representative from the Expert Group Meeting noted some key concerns surrounding the welfare of indigenous women, youth, and children, and recognized the particular injustices faced by them in regards to insufficient educational opportunities, exposure to gang violence, and human trafficking. He concluded with a hopeful remark, stating that although indigenous communities are living in a time characterized by immense challenges, there are also significant opportunities to take advantage of.

Additionally, the [International Labor Organization](http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/indigenous-tribal/lang--en/index.htm) (ILO) spoke about the social and economic challenges that indigenous people are facing in the world of work. Indigenous people are struggling to make a living from traditional income-generating sources and thus are forced to find alternative methods, which has led many in these communities to face severe violations of their fundamental right to work. Increasingly, indigenous people are trapped in new cycles of marginalization, and the ILO recommended promoting dialogue between stakeholders to craft a resolution to this problem.

A welcome announcement at this year’s Forum was the release of [The Indigenous Women’s Maternal Health and Maternal Mortality Fact Sheet by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)](https://www.unfpa.org/resources/indigenous-womens-maternal-health-and-maternal-mortality), which had been recommended at the 2016 session. The Fact Sheet brings together available data on maternal health status of indigenous women and adolescent girls to draw attention to this pressing issue.

The 17th Session of UNPFII assisted in pinpointing, analyzing, and emphasizing recurring challenges indigenous populations face in their communities. Through the implementation of the outlined recommendations, the perpetuation of indigenous marginalization could be minimized. The dialogue held during UNPFII shows that civil society, including faith-based organizations, have an important role to play in the realization of these recommendations, but in many circumstances have a long way to go and a lot more to do to assist in the protection and flourishing of indigenous peoples.

Following the proceedings of the seventeenth session, the Permanent Forum convened to discuss the recommendations suggested by the delegates and agreed to send [draft decisions](https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/hr5392.doc.htm) to the Economic and Social Council for approval from the member states. If you would like to learn more about the sessions that took place during UNPFII, you can click the link [here](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/unpfii-sessions-2/2017-2.html).

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