



22 April to 3 May 2019

18TH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Report from the Anglican Communion Office at the United
Nations

**“Traditional knowledge: Generation, transmission and
protection”**

The **United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)** was established in 2000 with the mandate to deal with indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. Each year a different area of focus is chosen for the Forum, with this year's theme being the transmission and protection of indigenous traditional knowledge and its role in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The 18th Session of the UNPFII highlighted a number of themes relevant to the concerns of the Anglican Communion. This report is organized around some of the key policy discussions that took place at the Forum and ends with some actions that the Anglican Communion Office at the United Nations (ACOUN) is committed to taking between now and the next meeting of the Permanent Forum in 2020:

1. Indigenous language preservation: the role of indigenous youth and technology
2. Indigenous people's advocacy: from local governments to international forums
3. Indigenous people and the fight against climate change
4. Violence against indigenous women
5. Recommendations for future action

1. Indigenous language preservation: the role of indigenous youth and technology

At this year's UNPFII, language as a channel of cultural transmission was highlighted as critically important. By the year 2100, 95% of spoken languages will disappear, and indigenous people are acutely aware of the urgency in preserving their native languages. Some indigenous groups assert that the ultimate solution to ensure the continuation of their native languages is by teaching them to children as their first language. Many others are taking on this task by using technology as a mode of education and targeting youth.

Indigenous youth are, often times, seen as the last hope for the preservation of their tribe's culture, tradition, and language. However, many indigenous speakers shared their concern over their youth's lack of interest in learning their ancestral traditions. Reasons most commonly mentioned included a lack of linguistic pride and an overall view of indigenous customs as out-of-date. To combat or reverse this trend, indigenous communities across the world have started utilizing innovative tactics in order to persuade indigenous youth to take part in learning their traditions. Most of these strategies include the use of technology as a tool of connection and learning. The tactics mentioned throughout the forum included:

- exposing youth to YouTube videos showing people speaking their native language in an attempt to avoid the feeling of cultural isolation;
- working with local governments to promote the use of indigenous clothing and artifacts in schools;
- creating animated versions of indigenous groups' stories in the form of smartphone apps; and
- organizing events that invite children to participate in traditional activities and learn the native language.

Many indigenous groups have been successful in their efforts, like the case of the Ati people in the Philippines, who opened the School for Living Tradition and, through their curriculum, encouraged students to see learning their native language as a way of self-understanding. Another inspiring success story was that of an indigenous-led social movement in Morocco that fought for and achieved the adoption of the indigenous Amazigh language as an official language of Morocco, along with French.

The preservation of native languages remains at the top of indigenous peoples' priority list, and although many initiatives have been quite successful in achieving that goal, there are still many obstacles. The most common ones expressed during the Forum were the lack of funding to continue and expand existing initiatives, and the lack of access to the technology that allows for the learning of the language.

2. Indigenous people's advocacy: from local governments to international fora

A clear trend in the dialogue and events of the UNPFII18 was indigenous people's efforts to bring global frameworks to local contexts. Many indigenous groups, such as the Mayan people of Belize, shared their experience of successfully lobbying their national governments using international law, UN treaties and documents such as the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and lessons learned from the Forum. Some indigenous groups in New Zealand are even working with their government to implement the treaties they have ratified in-country through various programs and initiatives.

However, for many of those present at the Forum, claiming their rights on a national level has been a painstaking task. The Mayan people in Argentina started the Movimiento Nacional Campesino Indigena to ensure they had adequate representation in parliament, as indigenous people were severely under-represented in decision-making bodies. Other indigenous groups expressed frustration over their government's failure to include the rights and concerns of indigenous people in domestic policy making despite having signed and ratified multilateral treaties pertaining to the rights of indigenous peoples. To address these frustrations, some Canadian indigenous groups suggested the creation of a "Modern Treaty Implementation Committee" that would ensure that international treaties are being implemented at the national level. Others also demanded a greater investment by UN bodies on the collection of data related to indigenous people's issues in order to make lobbying national governments easier.

Despite their active and renewed engagement, indigenous people still face many challenges in participating at the UN, even at the UNPFII. Some of these challenges include the difficulty in accessing visas to enter the United States; the bureaucracy needed to register for the UNPFII, which is sometimes hard to access and understand; the cost of travel and lodging; and the lack of translation in many UN events.

3. Indigenous people and the fight against climate change

Many indigenous groups throughout the Forum expressed their conviction in working with governments to combat climate change. Indigenous groups have often resided on their aboriginal land for thousands of years and have a deep connection with and respect for nature. As such, they consider themselves those most qualified to help governments care for the land. Traditional knowledge, indigenous knowledge and local knowledge are knowledge systems embedded in the cultural traditions of regional, indigenous, or local communities and in their understanding and stewardship of natural resources. Traditional knowledge was also highlighted as one of the prevailing solutions to the issue of climate change, and the urgent need for increased governmental-indigenous collaboration in preventing and remediating the effects of climate change was expressed.

Many collaboration success stories were shared, among which was the alliance between the indigenous people of Peru and Ecuador and their respective governments. After many negotiations, their governments ceded control of land stewardship to the Amazonian people through their organization: Cuencas Sagradas. Another story is the successful collaboration of the indigenous people of Siberia and the Russian government who have been collaborating on a project to protect Siberian forests and wildlife. Despite the success stories, most indigenous people are still lobbying their governments in an attempt to maintain control over their aboriginal land. Ensuring that governments recognize indigenous people's right to give or withhold consent to a project that may affect them or their territories (also known as Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC))—a right guaranteed to them under the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—is still a struggle for many indigenous groups. Many groups are currently fighting against illegal mining and logging and the contamination of their water sources.

4. Violence against indigenous women

Indigenous women continue to face multiple forms of discrimination, much of which manifests itself in the form of violence, including sexual assault, murder and kidnapping. During the discussions at the Forum, it was demonstrated that discriminatory legal systems have failed many times in their pursuance of justice. Additionally, indigenous women face a number of obstacles in accessing basic services like shelters and medical care. For example, of the 229 tribal communities in Alaska, only 170 have access to roads that help facilitate transportation to locations where these services exist. Indigenous people in the United States often speak of these inequalities as part of a larger system that systematically disenfranchises women of color in every aspect of society, especially indigenous women. Many believe that a transformation of society's perception of indigenous women is the only way to end the ongoing violence.

Encouraging respect of tribal authority and indigenous sovereignty was the one of the most favored solutions presented at the Forum. While some indigenous communities believe money in the form of reparations may be one answer to the problems they face, a holistic approach that would rebuild indigenous trust through reconciliation and transformative justice initiatives is seen as the preferred route. In particular, indigenous women believe that a restoration of indigenous sovereignty will help to ensure their safety. There was also a proposal to the Forum to form an international expert group to look at impunity, human trafficking, and failures of justice and law enforcement systems in response to missing and murdered indigenous women (MMIW).

5. Recommendations for Future Action

At UNPFII18 there was a clear lack of vocal representation of indigenous people who also consider themselves part of the Christian tradition. Moreover, churches are often still seen as colonizing institutions in mainstream discussions in the context of discussing indigenous issues. In light of this, the Anglican Communion has the opportunity to create spaces for healing and prophetic witness, and to affirm the life-giving connection between indigeneity and Christianity, while also acknowledging the historical context in which this relationship exists.

In the lead up to the 19th Session of the UNPFII in April 2020, the Anglican Communion Office at the United Nations (ACOUN) will:

1. Identify advocates and spokespeople from within the Anglican Indigenous Network (AIN) and beyond to participate in next year's UNPFII to represent the Anglican Communion in meetings, events, and in delivering statements.
2. Start planning a side event for UNPFII19, in partnership with AIN and The Episcopal Church delegation, to highlight the relationship between indigeneity and Christianity using examples of how indigenous traditions can be incorporated into religious services
3. Explore the possibility of recruiting participants from the AIN to participate in a human rights training, sponsored by the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples, through a social media campaign that would advertise this opportunity.
4. Find ways to engage the Anglican Communion in the UN global campaign against the criminalization of indigenous people, led by UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, Ms. Victoria Tauli Corpuz.
5. Support the Forum's recommendation that the General Assembly proclaim an International Decade on Indigenous Languages, to begin in 2021 or as soon as possible.

If you would like to get involved with the ACOUN's work at the United Nations please fill out this form: