The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: An Overview

Summary

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), through its resolution 2000/22 on 28 July 2000, established the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The Permanent Forum is a high-level advisory body that deals solely with indigenous issues. The Forum has a membership of sixteen independent experts, eight of whom are indigenous. The mandate of the Forum is to address indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights.

Background

Discussions about establishing the Permanent Forum for indigenous peoples began in the late 1980s. Indigenous peoples and others in the Working Group on Indigenous Populations felt that the structures of the United Nations were not well-suited to consider issues of concern to indigenous peoples comprehensively. In addition, they felt that the participation of indigenous representatives in the United Nations was limited. In light of these concerns, indigenous peoples and others proposed establishing a new body that would focus on global issues related to indigenous peoples and that would offer the opportunity for indigenous peoples to participate effectively.

Participants at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna discussed the creation of the Permanent Forum. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action recommended that such a forum should be established within the framework of the first United Nations International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (1995-2004).

In June 1995, a workshop was held in Copenhagen, Denmark, to discuss establishing a permanent forum for indigenous peoples. Participants included representatives of governments, indigenous peoples and independent experts. They discussed the potential scope of a permanent forum, which UN body the proposed forum would report to, the forum's mandate and terms of reference, including what activities it might undertake, membership, indigenous participation, its relationship with the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and financial and secretariat implications. The report of this workshop was transmitted to governments, indigenous peoples' organizations, and inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations. Recipients of the report were invited to express their views.

When the General Assembly adopted the Programme of Activities for the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, it recognized that the establishment of the Forum was one of the primary objectives of the Decade.

A second UN workshop on the Permanent Forum was held in Santiago, Chile in 1997, during which representatives of governments, indigenous peoples' organizations, NGOs, UN organizations and bodies and specialized agencies considered the findings of the Secretary-General's review and further developed proposals for establishing a permanent forum.
Throughout the entire process, indigenous groups around the world organized international conferences about the proposed Forum. Conferences were held in Chile, Panama, India, Geneva and Tanzania. These conferences produced Declarations with recommendations and proposals concerning the Forum’s mandate, membership, indigenous participation, location, and funding.

The Commission on Human Rights met in 1998 and created an ad hoc working group to consider proposals for establishing the Permanent Forum. The working group met first in early 1999, then convened another session in early 2000. By the end of the second session, the working group had designed concrete proposals that were then submitted to the Commission on Human Rights for consideration.

In April 2000, the Commission on Human Rights adopted a resolution to establish the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues during the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples. Three months later, the UN Economic and Social Council endorsed the resolution.

**Mandate**

The Permanent Forum is an advisory body to the ECOSOC that has a mandate to discuss indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights.

According to its mandate, the Permanent Forum will:

- provide expert advice and recommendations on indigenous issues to the Council, as well as to programmes, funds and agencies of the United Nations, through the Council
- raise awareness and promote the integration and coordination of activities related to indigenous issues within the UN system
- prepare and disseminate information on indigenous issues

**Membership**

The Permanent Forum is comprised of sixteen independent experts, functioning in their personal capacity, who serve for a term of three years as Members and may be re-elected or re-appointed for one additional term. Decisions should be made by consensus of the sixteen members.

Governments nominate eight of the Members and eight are nominated directly by indigenous organizations in their regions, in accordance with their own selection process. The selection process should be based on principles of fair representation, the diversity and geographical distribution of indigenous peoples, transparency, and equal opportunity for all indigenous peoples.

The Members nominated by governments are elected by ECOSOC based on the five regional groupings of States normally used at the United Nations (Africa; Asia; Eastern Europe; Latin America and the Caribbean; and Western Europe and Other States).
The Members nominated by indigenous organizations are appointed by the President of ECOSOC following formal consultations with governments, which, in turn, are expected to discuss the prospective nominees with the indigenous organizations. The nominees of indigenous organizations represent the seven socio-cultural regions determined to give broad representation to the world’s indigenous peoples.

The regions are Africa; Asia; Central and South America and the Caribbean; the Arctic; Central and Eastern Europe, Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia; North America; and the Pacific—with one additional rotating seat among the three first listed above.

**Participation**

Organizations of indigenous peoples may participate as observers in the meetings of the Permanent Forum, in accordance with the procedures that are applied in the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. (The Working Group on Indigenous Populations is open to all indigenous peoples’ organizations, regardless of their consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.) States, UN bodies and organs, inter-governmental organizations and NGOs that have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council may also participate as observers.

**Funding**

Financing for the Permanent Forum will be provided from within existing resources through the regular budget of the United Nations and its specialized agencies and through voluntary contributions.

The UN General Assembly in December 2002 passed resolution 57/19, which:

- established the UN Voluntary Fund for the Permanent Forum to fund the implementation of recommendations made by the Forum through ECOSOC
- established a secretariat unit, which shall be funded from the regular UN budget

**Secretariat**

The Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was established by the General Assembly in 2002. Based at UN Headquarters in New York in the Division for Social Policy and Development of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DSPD/DESA).

SPFII works year-round to:

- prepare for annual sessions of the Permanent Forum. The secretariat also provides support to the Members of the UNPFII throughout the year;
- advocate for, facilitate and promote the coordination of implementation within the UN system of the recommendations that emerge from each annual session and promote awareness of indigenous issues within the UN system, governments, and the broad public; and
serve as a source of information and a coordination point for advocacy efforts that relate to the Permanent Forum’s mandate and the ongoing issues that arise concerning indigenous peoples.

In preparation for the Permanent Forum’s annual sessions, SPFII solicits and prepares documentation, coordinates pre-registration of attendees, arranges logistics for the meeting, coordinates the multitude of special events during the session (some 60 such events taking place), and provides information notes on substance and logistics for the indigenous and non-governmental organizations that will attend, as well as for Members themselves. SPFII also collects and disseminates reports from UN agencies and others on implementation of the Permanent Forum’s recommendations that are studied and used by Members as an important part of their dialogue with the UN system and member states.

SPFII also prepares its report to the Permanent Forum — generally in March of each year — that discusses developments in the mandated areas and ongoing priorities/themes of the Permanent Forum; and helps to inform the work of the annual session.

Additionally SPFII facilitates the flow of information, both among Members, and between the Permanent Forum and the general public. Specifically, this flow is managed by fielding public queries, maintaining this website, and issuing a quarterly newsletter (called the Message Stick) and other informational materials for circulation. An awareness raising film on Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations has also been produced.

Within the UN system, SPFII takes advantage of its permanent presence at the United Nations Headquarters to advocate for implementation of the Permanent Forum’s recommendations during the year. SPFII also advocates for indigenous issues through its substantive support and participation in the UN Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues as well as through convening the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) Intra-Departmental Task Force of the UN Secretariat and participating in the meetings of the United Nations Development Group. SPFII staff members maintain an active circuit during the year of attendance at relevant indigenous issues meetings and workshops, usually in concert with Members of the Permanent Forum. SPFII actively promotes the integration of indigenous issues in the UN system by participating in a variety of inter-agency mechanisms, including the UN Development Group (UNDG), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the Inter Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANGWE) and other bodies.

SPFII also provides substantive support for the Trust Fund on Indigenous Issues and cooperates with various parts of the UN system in conceptualizing and implementing select pilot projects.

**Unique Features**

The Permanent Forum is a new and unique organ within the United Nations system:

- It is a high-level body, established at the same level in the UN system as the Commission on Human Rights.
• It is the only body within the UN system that deals solely with indigenous issues. The Forum will cover a broad range of issues related to indigenous peoples: not only human rights, but also education, culture, the environment and health. The Forum will take a holistic approach to these issues.

• With the establishment of the Forum, indigenous peoples have become members of a UN body and, as such, will help set the Forum’s agenda and determine its outcomes. This is unprecedented within the UN system.

• By adopting the procedures for participation of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, the Forum offers indigenous peoples the opportunity for full involvement.

Methods of Work

• The Permanent Forum holds annual two-week sessions. The first meeting of the Permanent Forum in May 2002, as well as subsequent yearly sessions have been taking place in New York. Sessions may also take place in Geneva or any other place decided by the Forum.

• Special themes are adopted for the Forum’s yearly sessions, in order to better focus the debates and discussions
  o 2003 – Indigenous Children and Youth
  o 2004 – Indigenous Women
  o 2005 – Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Goals 1 (Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger) & 2 (Achieve universal primary education)
  o 2006 – MDGs and Indigenous Peoples: Re-Defining the MDGs
  o 2007 – Territories, Lands and Natural Resources

• The Forum organizes international expert meetings on issues identified as timely and relevant during the Forum’s annual sessions
  o Disaggregated data
  o Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)
  o Indigenous Peoples and Development
  o Indigenous Peoples and Migration
  o MDGs, Indigenous Participation and Good Governance
  o Convention on Biological Diversity's International Regime on Access and Benefit-Sharing and Indigenous Peoples' Human Rights

• The Forum has evolved a portfolio system to enable Forum Members to effectively engage with various UN agencies

• The Forum coordinates closely with the Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues (IASG)

• Friends of the Forum and Indigenous Caucus
  • Informal coordinating mechanism between governments and the members of the Permanent Forum.
- Meeting with the Friends of the Forum on a regular basis during the Sessions of the PF
- Meeting with the Indigenous Caucus
- Side-events during Sessions.
- Formal adoption of recommendations.
- Reports Website: www.un.org/desa/socdev/pfii

Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues (IASG)

The IASG was established to support and promote the mandate of the Forum within the UN system. It is a coordinating mechanism between various UN Agencies, Bodies, Programmes and Funds. Its mandate was later expanded to include support for indigenous related mandates throughout the inter-governmental system. It allows the UN system and other intergovernmental organizations to analyze recommendations made by the Forum with a view to facilitating comprehensive and coordinated responses to the UNPFII. The IASG Chairmanship rotates annually. As of 2006, the Chairmanship has been held by the ILO, the World Bank, WIPO, UNDP, UNICEF and IFAD.

As of 2005, the IASG includes twenty-nine (29) members:

- UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)
- UN Department of Public Information (DPI)
- Secretariat for the Convention on Biological Diversity (SCBD)
- Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO)
- International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
- International Labour Organisation (ILO)
- International Organization for Migration (IOM)
- United Nations Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
- United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
- United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
- United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
- United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
- United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT)
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)
- United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO)
- United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)
- World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)
- World Health Organization WHO
- World Bank
- Inter-American Development Bank (IADB)
- European Union
Sources
