



Indigenous peoples' sustainable livelihoods

by Carol Kalafatic



© FAO/G.Bizzarri - Tanzania, 2004: Maasai children and animals

Understanding the uniqueness of indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples are often among the world's rural poor. Yet, at the same time, they are distinct from them due to their historical, socio-cultural and political characteristics. The majority of indigenous peoples have histories marked by shifts from being fully independent peoples and nations to being colonized, marginalized or even evicted from their territories.

Indigenous peoples' relationships to their lands, territories and natural resources carry unique social, cultural, spiritual, economic and political dimensions and responsibilities. The inter-generational aspects of these relationships are crucial to indigenous peoples' identity, cultural viability and survival.

In addition, indigenous peoples have collective rights recognized by international law. They have retained and seek to retain their own languages and other cultural foundations including their traditional forms of social organization, governance structures, institutions and customary laws, as well as their collective historical and cultural ties to their ancestral territories.

Because of these characteristics, indigenous peoples have unique relationships to the countries in which they live, centred on their desire to exercise their right of self-determination. They pursue self-determination not as a means to undermine state sovereignty but as a means to co-exist with others who live within those states and, at the same time, determine their own pathways for economic, social and cultural development.

Indigenous peoples contribution to food and agriculture

Indigenous peoples and their civilizations have contributed greatly to the world's agricultural diversity and its related biological diversity and knowledge diversity. They are the originators and custodians of millennial and dynamic agriculture and food systems that remain viable in the twenty first century. Their resource management practices and techniques contribute to the maintenance and adaptation of productive, sustainable ecosystems.

An overwhelming majority of the world's remaining biodiversity is found within indigenous peoples' territories, illustrating the fundamental interdependence between the abundance of plant and animal species and the culturally-based resource management practices of indigenous peoples. Through the knowledge systems, technologies and institutions they have developed for the holistic management of this biodiversity, indigenous peoples play a key role in the domestication, conservation and adaptation of genetic resources and agricultural biodiversity, not just for their immediate surroundings but also at landscape scale.

Indigenous peoples' agricultural, hunting, gathering, fishing, animal husbandry and forestry practices typically incorporate sustainable use of land and water resources, as well as various habitats and economic, social and cultural components. This, in turn, contributes to sustainable land and water management, forest and marine conservation, and efforts to combat desertification. Through their dynamic conservation of bio-cultural diversity (e.g. diversity of seed stock, crops and related knowledge systems), they contribute to climate change adaptation and risk mitigation. Also, indigenous peoples' sustainable management practices have enabled them to endure in highly vulnerable environments and regions such as drylands, wetlands, mountains, tropical rain forests, coral reefs and the Arctic, indicating that the continuity of their sustainable management practices in these fragile environments is invaluable.

Indigenous peoples, poverty and the Millennium Development Goals

The United Nations (UN) uses the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to guide coherent work in the field. The stated aim of the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG-1) is to reduce the number of poor and hungry people in the world by half by 2015. Yet, MDG-1 considers poverty only in terms of economic deprivation without considering the systemic discrimination, marginalization and denial of social and cultural rights that engender poverty, particularly among indigenous peoples. It also does not analyze the extent to which denial of or failure to operationalize rights is an underlying cause of poverty and hunger. The result is a lack of criteria and indicators for effective MDG efforts regarding indigenous peoples, and lack of safeguards against indigenous peoples' harm or displacement from their lands and territories by MDG initiatives, such as large hydro-electric projects.

UN agency studies on indigenous peoples, human development and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) have found that sustainable achievement of MDGs for indigenous peoples requires ethnicity-related data disaggregation as a first step toward recognizing the existence of difference and building inclusive and culturally diverse societies. Concerned that MDG processes may actually accelerate loss of indigenous lands, natural resources and means of subsistence, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) has recommended that national governments, the UN and other intergovernmental organizations ensure indigenous peoples' participation in the design, implementation and monitoring of poverty reduction strategies.

A 2005 report by the Inter-Agency Support Group which promotes the UNPFII mandate within the UN system confirmed that indigenous peoples lag behind in MDG achievement and recommended that UN agencies and member nations take into account the many levels and sources of discrimination and exclusion faced by indigenous peoples. The report also called for the achievement of all the MDGs with the full participation of indigenous peoples and without interference in their development needs and priorities.

Indigenous peoples' perspectives on globalization and trade liberalization

Indigenous peoples suffer disproportionately from the impacts of globalization and trade liberalization through the environmental degradation, destruction of biological and cultural diversity, and militarization and violence that often accompany large-scale development. Import liberalization allows inexpensive, subsidized agricultural products to enter indigenous communities, gravely compromising their sustainable agricultural practices, livelihoods and food security. Industrial cash-crop plantations have replaced small-scale farms that produce food mainly for subsistence and local markets. This has led to massive dislocation of people who then migrate to cities and often wind up jobless and homeless.

Increased deforestation and mining and oil development have led to degradation of many ecosystems in which indigenous peoples live, and from which they derive their livelihoods. The degradation has also displaced many from their ancestral lands.

The World Trade Organization's Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) Agreement has facilitated patenting of indigenous peoples' biogenetic resources. As such, it threatens indigenous peoples' ability to access, cultivate and control their food and medicinal resources and traditional knowledge, as well as to continue their seed saving, sharing and trading practices.

In the face of globalization, indigenous peoples have intensified their call for recognition and protection of their inherent sovereignty over their lands, territories and natural resources. They insist on the principle of *free, prior and informed consent*, and they reserve the right to reject development activities that they deem inappropriate. At the same time, they strive to maintain a sustainable communities approach to overall well-being that offers a viable alternative to the prevailing export-driven economic growth paradigm.

Lands, territories and natural resources

Indigenous peoples face numerous challenges that limit or prevent their access to their lands, territories and the natural resources upon which their livelihoods depend. These challenges often involve violations or lack of enforcement of land tenure, demarcation or titling regulations or policies. Also, in many countries, indigenous peoples are among the most economically, culturally, socially and politically marginalized. Barriers to their participation in policy-making, often because of prejudices against traditional cultures, have thwarted support for indigenous peoples' institutions and systems for natural resource management and sustainable development. Yet their subsistence production and local economic systems provide employment, food and ecosystem services for millions of people, all of which are significant "hidden" contributions to national economies (i.e. not reflected in GDP statistics).

For reasons often related to colonization and occupation, transboundary issues affect many indigenous peoples. Many live in territories that predate nation states and therefore their populations span state boundaries, such as the Maya in Guatemala, Mexico and Belize, or numerous peoples in the Indo-Burma region. In addition, nomadic peoples who depend on the natural resources and habitats in multiple states are affected by state borders and differing national policies that limit the movement of people, animals and goods. Armed conflict between states increases the vulnerability of transboundary indigenous peoples and their agricultural production and distribution systems.

Case Study: Potato Park

Six indigenous Quechua communities with a total of 8 000 villagers have combined their land and expertise in an initiative for conserving agrobiodiversity and socio-cultural systems near Pisac, Peru. Known as "Potato Park" because it is near the centre of diversity for potatoes, it is dedicated to strengthening livelihoods, customary laws and institutions for local control of heritage, lands and genetic resources.

Planned and managed by an association led by traditional authorities of the six communities, its management is based on customary law and traditional knowledge. It also uses GIS mapping of culturally critical areas and patterns of land tenure, access and use.

The wealth of the area includes its 1,200 potato varieties that are managed by local people and traded in the region's barter market. Local people are also re-establishing native forests to produce medicines, fertilizers, fuel and fodder, and to attract wildlife species that will strengthen agro-ecotourism.

Prioritizing a rights-based approach and the decentralized management of agrobiodiversity, the communities have developed a legally-binding agreement that has repatriated hundreds of potato varieties from a gene bank. The agreement allows the communities to continue developing their genetic heritage for food and livelihood security, while, at the same time, they are conserving and managing it for global benefit.

Indigenous peoples' perspectives and aspirations: food security & food sovereignty

Indigenous peoples seek food security and food sovereignty, as well as the protection and strengthening of their local production and economic systems. They value opportunities for livelihood diversification, fair trade and other mechanisms that respect and support their ways of life.

The socio-cultural characteristics shared by indigenous peoples and the principle of *self-determination* have vast implications for food security. The 1996 World Food Summit (WFS) Plan of Action states, "food security exists when all people have at all times physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." This implies that access to culturally preferred food is a measure of food security.

For indigenous peoples, the cultural appropriateness of food is a critical aspect of food sovereignty. This means more than having access to the food item itself. It applies to how and where the food is produced, harvested, distributed and consumed; whether certain social structures related to agriculture (or fishing, hunting, gathering or animal husbandry) and food are intact; and whether indigenous peoples can freely exercise the ceremonial practices integral to their agriculture and food systems.

Through the WFS Plan of Action, states pledged to create enabling environments and participatory means to address food security. Acknowledging the distinctness of indigenous peoples and the importance of their self-development efforts, they further committed to "recognize and support indigenous people (sic.) and their communities in their pursuit of economic and social development, with full respect for their identity, traditions, forms of social organization and cultural values."

© FAO/6813/F. Mattioli - Yemen, 1972: Farmers harvesting Dutch potatoes at Makroug near Ibb in the Highlands



Sustainable Livelihoods Approach: potential contributions to indigenous peoples

Many obstacles limit or prevent indigenous peoples' access to and control over livelihood "assets" – their lands, territories and natural and other resources – and are the root causes of their poverty. Forces such as trade liberalization and climate change are intensifying the environmental, socio-cultural and economic pressures indigenous people face, further degrading and depleting the natural resources they depend upon for their livelihoods.

Several components of a Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) could reinforce indigenous peoples' aspirations for food and livelihood security, and for their overall poverty reduction. For instance, SLA can serve to:

- identify the roles and multilevel interactions of institutions, political environments and policies in determining access to livelihood assets, and
- prioritize poverty reduction efforts designed to strengthen people's ability to access and manage their environmental and natural assets such as health, traditional knowledge and social support networks.

Once the issues are identified and prioritized through the SLA, the knowledge can be applied to:

- help indigenous peoples address their challenges regarding land, territory and natural resources, as well as the increased pressures on their traditional knowledge systems and cultures, and
- increase opportunities for diversification of livelihoods strategies, which in turn could bolster resilience in the face of various shocks or threats.

Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)

In 2003 representatives of UN bodies formulated the "Statement of Common Understanding of HRBA in Development Cooperation," which is a useful framework for applying HRBA. It states in part:

1. *All programmes of development co-operation, policies and technical assistance should further the realisation of human rights as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.*
2. *Human rights standards contained in, and principles derived from, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments guide all development cooperation and programming in all sectors and in all phases of the programming process.*
3. *Development cooperation contributes to the development of the capacities of 'duty-bearers' to meet their obligations and/or of 'rights-holders' to claim their rights."*

In addition, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food provide guidance for HRBA and can be found at: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/009/y9825e/y9825e00.htm>

Key principles and approach for FAO engagement with indigenous peoples

A number of organs and specialized agencies of the UN system have adopted specific policies to guide and thereby improve their respective engagement with indigenous peoples. The General Assembly's adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2007 (A/RES/61/295) has been a catalyst in this regard, urging the UN, its bodies and specialized agencies to realize the Declaration's provisions.

Several principles within international law provide a basis for existing UN system policies on indigenous peoples. These include self-determination, development with identity, and the maintenance of rights to land and territory as well as to natural, tangible and knowledge resources.

To strengthen and mainstream its engagement and cross-cutting work with indigenous peoples, FAO should develop and implement a specific vision and policy framed within the following fundamental principles:

- respect for indigenous peoples' self determination and self-development;
- respect for and strengthening of indigenous peoples' institutions, governance structures and customary laws;
- recognition of free, prior and informed consent, including participation of traditional leadership;
- direct and effective participation of indigenous peoples in policy development and programmatic processes at all levels (local, national, regional and international) and stages (planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and remediation), with particular emphasis on participation by indigenous women;
- respect for and use of participatory traditional knowledge and culturally-sensitive indicators in disaggregated data collection and analysis.

These interrelated principles are embedded in basic human rights. For indigenous peoples in particular, it is not possible to discuss development and food security without addressing basic rights to lands and resources, culture and identity, and self-determination. Therefore, a human rights-based approach (HRBA) should be applied in a cross-cutting manner throughout FAO's work with indigenous peoples. The use of HRBA in food and livelihood security work is consistent with FAO's Strategic Framework, and crucial to achieving the MDGs.



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

**FAO's Livelihood
Support Programme
(2001-2007) wishes
to acknowledge the
generous support
received from the
United Kingdom's
Department for
International
Development.**

Contacts

Regina Laub,
FAO focal point for
indigenous peoples
regina.laub@fao.org

Concluding comments: the way forward for FAO together with indigenous peoples

Throughout the world, indigenous peoples are among the most vulnerable with respect to food and livelihood security. Yet they are also the primary innovators and custodians of a majority of the world's agricultural diversity and its related biological and knowledge diversity. They are thus a vital beneficiary group and ally of FAO in its efforts to achieve its strategic objectives in nutrition, food security and sustainable agriculture.

Because of indigenous peoples' unique relationships with their national governments, the UN and other inter-governmental organizations have recognized that indigenous peoples require specific attention and acceptance of their ways of working within their own mechanisms of governance and sustainable development. A number of development agencies and financial organizations have adopted specific policies towards indigenous peoples to guide their relevant programmes and projects.

Indigenous peoples and FAO share an interest in specific thematic areas in food and agriculture, suggesting opportunities for collaboration. However, in order for FAO's efforts to achieve lasting impact, especially in relation to the MDGs, it is essential for FAO to work more systematically with indigenous peoples and their organizations. To do so, FAO should examine existing frameworks for the development of a cross-cutting, corporate policy on indigenous peoples, and should establish and implement such a policy, as have other UN agencies and related institutions. Such a policy would advance sustainable development in a manner that is respectful of and meaningful for indigenous peoples and, in turn, would be invaluable for the achievement of FAO's strategic objectives.