

**Opinion piece for the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples****by Navanethem Pillay****United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights****More than a symbolic celebration**

The estimated 370 million indigenous peoples need and deserve more than just symbolic celebrations on 9 August, when they commemorate everywhere the International Day devoted to the reaffirmation of the value and resilience of indigenous life and cultures. After centuries of repression, they need comprehensive tools to defend their human rights, their way of life, and their aspirations.

One such tool is the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Among other provisions, the Declaration emphasized human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination for indigenous peoples. It established their right to self-determination and to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully in public life. Crucially, this document underscored indigenous peoples' right to preserve or freely dispose of and trade their traditional lands and resources.

Following negotiations that spanned more than two decades, the Declaration was adopted in September 2007 by the General Assembly with the support of 143 member states. This support keeps expanding. Significantly, Australia and Columbia—two of the countries that originally did not approve the text—have now endorsed the Declaration. These developments are encouraging, but we must continue to strive for universal acceptance of this crucial document.

Such acceptance is key to counter the daily hardship and discrimination that indigenous peoples endure. It is estimated that at least one in every ten indigenous peoples in the world is facing extreme poverty. These peoples are more likely to

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receive inadequate health services and poor education—if any at all. Economic development plans often bypass them or do not take into sufficient consideration their particular needs and traditions. Other decision-making processes are often equally contemptuous of or indifferent to their contribution and customs. As a result, laws and policies designed by majorities with little regard to indigenous concerns frequently lead to land disputes and conflicts over natural resources that threaten the way of life and very survival of indigenous peoples.

We must step up our common efforts to make the Declaration something more than a mere pledge of intent. We must translate its letter and spirit into concrete change, change that can be felt in indigenous peoples' daily life.

In line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other human rights instruments, States, indigenous peoples, the United Nations system and others concerned must join their efforts and reach solutions based on true dialogue, mutual understanding, tolerance and respect for human rights.

I am confident that giving indigenous peoples a true voice and say in decision-making would benefit not only them, but also our whole societies, as we look for answers to address major challenges. Consider, for example, the impact of climate change. Indigenous peoples, such as indigenous reindeer herders in the Arctic or the pastoralist Maasai community in East Africa, face the risk of bearing the brunt of climate change. But their cultures, experience and knowledge of the environment can—and ought to—provide solutions to address this and other common global threats. When we defend indigenous peoples' rights in the face of land grabs and expropriation, we are also likely to protect biodiversity. This is evident in places, such as the Amazon region, where sustainable forestry methods mastered by indigenous peoples can help to address the serious problem of deforestation.

Ways to promote indigenous peoples' rights in policy development and their participation in public life must be found primarily at the national level. But governments can also benefit from the human rights expertise, legislative savvy and

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advocacy of UN human rights mechanisms, as well as contributions from civil society. These partners in indigenous rights can help refine reforms according to international standards and make indigenous peoples' concerns resonate at the international level. These mechanisms include the Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues, which gathers hundreds of indigenous representatives annually, and the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, who has helped to advance their human rights in a range of country situations. In addition, the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is tasked to formulate advice on their entitlement to education, a key theme for indigenous peoples around the world.

There is still a long way to go. No doubt the road ahead will be bumpy. But let us work together to move the principles of the Declaration from paper into practice. We need to act now to ensure that indigenous peoples live in dignity and prosper. They have waited a long time. They expect nothing less.

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The United Nations Country Team in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is committed to supporting the efforts of the Government to improve the life of all citizens, especially those most vulnerable. We shall continue to work closely with the Government and all development partners for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Our collective endeavour is to assist the people of Lao PDR to achieve progress and better standards of living for all.