

Integration Dialogue 1
Institutional strengthening, governance, inclusion and the rule of law
27 May 2021

Remarks by Anne Nuorgam, Chair of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Excellencies, colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous issues held its 20th session in hybrid format in April. The thematic focus “Peace justice and strong institutions – the role of indigenous peoples in implementing SDG 16” was carried over from 2020. Similar to other subsidiary bodies, the Permanent Forum framed within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the lives of indigenous peoples. In December 2020, DESA in response to a recommendation of the Permanent Forum organized an expert group meeting on “indigenous peoples and pandemics”.

The recent Forum session **highlighted how preexisting inequalities have been exacerbated by ongoing COVID-19 pandemic**. It laid bare that in many countries, indigenous peoples’ inadequate access to culturally appropriate health care, sanitation, digital infrastructure to access education, social protection and access to markets left them even more vulnerable during COVID. These circumstances have led to disproportionately high infection and mortality rates among indigenous peoples in many countries. **However**, the Permanent Forum also heard that where indigenous peoples have been able to exercise their self-determination they organized their own responses to the pandemic. They have relied on and revitalized traditional medicines and practices, established efficient alternative communication systems in their indigenous languages, shared food supplies and established procedures for lockdowns. Where these initiatives were supported by the State, they were even more successful in effectively reaching indigenous peoples.

The Forum noted that the nondiscriminatory delivery and administration of **vaccines is a key issue** in recovery plans and efforts. However, on the issue of

recovery plans and building back better, the Forum was also seized with the increasing threats to indigenous lands, territories and resources that have only increased during COVID-19 lockdowns. Further, the violence and killings of indigenous human rights defenders is on the rise.

The Forum noted that “the relaxing of environmental and human rights standards with the view to the promotion of economic growth, such as logging, mining, large-scale agriculture and various infrastructure and energy projects, threaten indigenous peoples’ territories”. **Indigenous peoples fear that in the rush to build back economies post-COVID-19**, the lure financial resources to be made by further exploitation of indigenous lands will increase. This will lead to increased poverty, inequality and food insecurity, violence against indigenous women and girls, and limited access to justice. Therefore, even more than ever, **respect for free, prior and informed consent** and support for indigenous peoples to engage with the private sector, if they wish, and on their own terms is crucial.

The concept of building back better also implies opportunities to recognize and value the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples in safeguarding and conserving the environment, actions which can significantly advance the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Indigenous peoples **offer a solution to many of urgent crisis facing the world.**

Indigenous peoples’ management of their lands, territories and resources is not only good for the environment and biological diversity but is also important for maintaining international peace and security – and the interlinkages are becoming more apparent. The Permanent Forum emphasizes that climate change is an increasing driver of insecurity, exacerbating conflicts over lands, territories and resources. Member States and the United Nations system should look to indigenous peoples as partners to address possible solutions in situations of conflict.

Check against delivery

Effective responses to the pandemic and recovery measures need to be a collaborative effort between Indigenous institutions and State institutions. Combining indigenous knowledge of what is best for indigenous peoples with State services and financial support will ensure effective and long-term positive outcomes.

As I have said, for indigenous peoples, there are many cross-cutting issues, but the issue of autonomy and self-governance, strong institutions, peace and security and access to justice ensures the preservation of their culture, and management of indigenous lands, territories and resources. However, we continue to work both within and outside the UN system to raise awareness of the benefits to society in fulfilling these rights.

The Forum continues to engage through ECOSOC with other subsidiary bodies and the HLPF to bring the benefits of indigenous knowledge into discussions of biodiversity, climate change, food security, peace and security, governance, and the preservation of sustainable natural resources. We see ECOSOC as the nexus to make those linkages and to break silos between its functional and advisory bodies on the patch to a post-COVID recovery.

Thank you