

Leaflet No. 6 : The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Key words and ideas

**Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action
Programme of Activities of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous
People (1995-2004)
Mandate**

Summary: The United Nations Economic and Social Council recently established the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The Permanent Forum is a high-level advisory body that deals solely with indigenous issues. The Forum is composed of sixteen members, eight of whom are indigenous experts. 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 UN 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 United Nations International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (1995-2004).

In June 1995, a United Nations 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 Peoples**, it recognized that the establishment of the Forum was one of the primary objectives of the Decade.

In 1995, the General Assembly recommended that the UN Secretary-General review existing mechanisms, procedures and programmes within the UN system concerning indigenous peoples. This review involved consultations with governments, UN organs and bodies, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, and indigenous peoples' organizations.

The Secretary-General's review found that no mechanism existed to ensure regular exchange of information among governments, the UN system and indigenous peoples. The Secretary-General's report also noted that there were no adequate procedures in place to accommodate the effective involvement of, and consultation with, indigenous peoples on matters affecting their welfare.

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. The workshop reported to the Commission on Human Rights with suggestions on how to proceed.

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.

Key features

The Permanent Forum is a new body in the UN system and has some unique features :

Mandate

The Permanent Forum is an advisory body to the Economic and Social Council with a mandate to discuss indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. 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 composed of sixteen experts. Eight members will be nominated by governments and elected by the Council ; eight will be appointed by the President of the Economic and Social Council following formal consultations with governments which, in turn, have discussed prospective nominees with indigenous organizations. The selection process will be based on principles of fair representation, the diversity and geographical distribution of indigenous peoples, transparency, and equal opportunity for all indigenous peoples.

The sixteen members will serve in their personal capacities as independent experts on indigenous issues. They will be appointed for a period of three years with the possibility of re-election or reappointment for another 3-year period. Decisions will be made by consensus of the sixteen members.

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.

Location

The Permanent Forum is to hold an annual session of ten working days. The meetings could be held at the UN Office in Geneva, at UN Headquarters in New York, or wherever the Permanent Forum may decide.

The first meeting of the Permanent Forum will likely be held in 2002.

Secretariat

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is designated as the 'lead agency' to implement the resolution on the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

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.

A unique Forum

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.

A great challenge

Although it may take some time before all indigenous peoples learn about the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, they will, no doubt, want to make full use of the Forum once they do. It will be up to the participating organizations and the sixteen independent experts to make the Forum a dynamic, effective and respected body in the United Nations, and an organ of service to the world's indigenous peoples.