



Indigenous Issues

[The occasional briefing papers of the Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Network (AITPN)]
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Embargoed for: 31 May 2006

CATCHING THE MISSED MDG BUS: Permanent Forum or Perfunctory Forum?

I. How important are the Millennium Development Goals, MDGs?

Since the Millennium Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2000, the MDGs have come to shape programmes of governments and donors of the world. Many rights, enforceable by definition, became Goals, a set of targets. The US dollars - "less than one dollar a day" to be precise - became the yardsticks for measuring hunger and poverty. The adoption of the MDGs may well be construed as the final declaration of the victory of the laissez-faire economics even Adam Smith would not have foreseen!

When the Member States of the United Nations adopted the MDGs in September 2000, the Commission on Human Rights was considering whether to establish a UN body to deal with indigenous peoples. The MDGs failed to make any specific reference to indigenous peoples. Undoubtedly, indigenous peoples are on the lowest rung of the ladder of the society. They are also poor because of their origin, descent and discrimination they face. The 2005 report of the UN on the MDGs stated: "The lowest levels of attendance are found among indigenous peoples and other minority groups. Addressing these disparities and reaching the most disadvantaged will be the greatest challenge in achieving universal primary education". Is this something new? It has been universally known. Yet, the MDGs much like the Charter of the United Nations or the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and subsequent international human rights standards failed to refer to indigenous peoples or root cause of their poverty. Generalisation is another name of assimilation!

In 2002, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was established. Effectively, indigenous peoples and their protagonist at the United Nations, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues missed the MDG bus. Since its third session in May 2004, the Permanent Forum however has been trying to catch the MDG bus that it actually missed. The Permanent Forum is still far from catching the missed bus but it has already given up!

At its 4th session from 16 to 27 May 2005, the Permanent Forum spent one full week to discuss two goals of the MDGs: Goal 1: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; and Goal 2: achieve universal primary education. Another week was spent at the 5th session on "Special theme: the Millennium Development Goals and indigenous peoples: redefining the Goals". Intersperse these discussions to redefine the MDGs - that can easily be construed as opening the MDGs for further negotiations - with closed door meetings of the members of the Permanent Forum and mundane dialogue with the UN agencies, the sessions of the PFII become useless and delusional if not perverse.

At the first week of the 5th session, majority indigenous representatives were at lost, as the Permanent Forum dragged on to discuss the MDGs only to conclude that "the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues appreciates that it may not be possible to redefine the Goals". The Forum urged for the redesigning of approaches to the implementation of the Goals so as to include the perspectives, concerns, experiences and world views of indigenous peoples. Well said, but means nothing!

II. Cacophony and the UN mandarins

Part of the mundane discussion relates to the mandate of the Permanent Forum to coordinate with UN agencies. After five years, Permanent Forum is yet to decide whether it should hold its discussion as one of the UN specialised agencies without requisite secretariat assistance and funds, or as a political body, similar to the functional commissions, without any mandate to act as such. The Permanent Forum has also been desperate to be different from its competitor, the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples.

Worse, the much-vaunted debate with the UN agencies that the Permanent Forum highlights as one of the indicators of its effectiveness is actually not highlighted in the final reports of various sessions. These UN specialised agencies are uniformly inaccessible to indigenous peoples including members of the Forum at national level across the world. Yet, holier than the cow attitude of many UN agencies is omnipresent. Inter-Agency Task Force of the Permanent Forum has become a forum to set self-promotion agenda of the UN agencies. Even the World Bank has found a UN forum to seek and claim legitimacy.

It is clear that critical indigenous issues have been lost in the semantics of the UN. In more ways than one, it appears to have been held hostage to a cacophony of self-promotion agenda of the UN agencies.

III. A "Perfunctory Forum"?

The Draft Decision IV of the 5th session of the Permanent Forum on the "Provisional agenda and documentation for the sixth session" that relates to the Millennium Development Goals with the mandated areas of the Permanent Forum may finally bring the PFII to the earth. With the abolition of the WGIP, the Permanent Forum should take cognizance of its new role as a political body. Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Network consistently highlighted organisation of work and time management as key to improving the efficacy of the Forum. It is more important considering that the secretariat of the Forum does not have adequate staff and it appears to be lost at the UN headquarters in New York.

The experiences of now-defunct Commission on Human Rights provide some guidance. Time management must uniformly apply to all - dignitaries, special invitees, members of the Permanent Forum and other observers. This has not been followed even when the debates have been absolutely mundane. Moreover, why should the Permanent Forum members spend time allocated for the plenary for their closed door meetings? Indigenous representatives vehemently protested whenever the government delegates sought time for their internal negotiations at the Working Group on the Draft Declaration. It is not a practice followed by the Sub-Commission on Human Rights. Nor is it a practice followed by the Bureau of the now defunct Commission on Human Rights or newly established Human Rights Council.

Are the Permanent Forum members too busy or lazy to hold closed door meetings at some other times so as to not take away time allotted for all? If indigenous peoples continue to be denied the space by none other than the members of the Permanent Forum, the Permanent Forum runs the risk of being reduced to "Perfunctory Forum".