

**Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**  
**Seventh session**  
New York, 21 April - 2 May 2008

## **Conference on Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change**

**Copenhagen, 21 – 22 February 2008**

### **MEETING REPORT**

**Submitted by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)**

***Summary:***

The Conference on Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change was held in Copenhagen, Denmark 21-22 February 2008. The Conference was organized by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) in preparation for the 7<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues as well as the World Conference on Climate Change (COP 15) in Copenhagen in 2009.

The aim of the Conference was to discuss the impacts of climate change on indigenous peoples and how global agreements, political processes and restrictive regulations hinder indigenous peoples in their aim to respond and adapt to climate change. The Conference also looked at how indigenous peoples' contributions to current discussions on these crucial issues can be secured.

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## **I. Background**

1. From 21 to 22 February 2008, a total of 60 indigenous peoples' representatives, Danish Foreign Ministry staff, Greenland Home Rule representatives, development practitioners, and members of the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) gathered in Copenhagen, Denmark to discuss the challenges and major threats facing indigenous peoples as a result of climate change. The Conference was organized by IWGIA.

2. Regional and global assessments confirm that the Earth's climate is changing. Current and projected levels of exposure to climate-related sensitivities, as well as limits and restrictions to adaptive capacity, mean that some environments and peoples are more exposed to climate change and are significantly more vulnerable to its impacts and long-term consequences.

3. Indigenous peoples depend on natural resources for their livelihood and they often inhabit diverse but fragile ecosystems. At the same time indigenous peoples are among the world's most marginalized, impoverished and vulnerable peoples. Hence, while indigenous peoples bear the brunt of the catastrophe of climate change, they have minimal access to resources to cope with the changes.

4. For indigenous peoples around the world, climate change brings different kinds of risks, brings threats to cultural survival and undermines indigenous human rights. The consequences of ecosystem changes have implications for the use, protection and management of wildlife, fisheries, and forests, affecting the customary uses of culturally and economically important species and resources.

5. Despite the impact of climate change on indigenous peoples and their traditional knowledge, international experts most often overlook the rights of indigenous peoples as well

as the potentially invaluable contributions from indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge, innovations and practices in the global search for climate change solutions. As the global discourse on climate change focuses on understanding how we can scientifically and technologically adapt to and mitigate climate change, indigenous peoples are faced with climate change further challenging their abilities to adapt and cope with environmental changes.

6. Increasingly, international and national climate change mitigation strategies pose an additional threat to indigenous peoples' territories and coping strategies. When the development of hydro-electricity is suggested as part of a government's mitigation strategy it often involves removing indigenous peoples from their traditional territories. Mono-crop plantations for agro-fuels affect the ecosystem, the water supply and the whole anatomy of the landscape on which indigenous peoples depend.

7. Additionally, a number of national and international mitigation institutions have been created – institutions which do not necessarily take into considerations the views and interests of indigenous peoples but which indigenous peoples, nevertheless, have to relate to and try to accommodate with.

8. The Conference on Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change organised by IWGIA focused on the key issues facing indigenous peoples in the context of climate change, including the human rights aspects of climate change. The discussions went beyond the impacts of climate change and looked at how global mitigation policies, political processes and regulations facilitate or prevent indigenous peoples in their efforts to respond and adapt to climate change.

## **II. Key issues identified**

9. The conference participants identified the following key issues of relevance to indigenous peoples and climate change:

### **(a) Effects of climate change**

10. Indigenous peoples are affected by climate change in multiple ways with the effects varying according to the different locations and ecosystems in which they live; from diminishing sea ice and shifting animal migration routes in the Arctic, to increased fires in tropical rainforests and reductions in rainfall in temperate ecosystems, to intensified threats to water and food security, increased coastal erosion and forced evictions of communities from their traditional territories. In many instances indigenous peoples are also affected by the solutions proposed to reverse the negative impacts of climate change, such as the appropriation of indigenous lands to establish oil palm plantations to produce agro-fuels.

11. Climate change must, however, be seen in the wider context of indigenous peoples being among the world's most marginalized, impoverished and vulnerable peoples. Climate change magnifies already existing problems because the unprecedented changes in the environment and natural resource base and policies to address these changes erode indigenous peoples' adaptive capacity and community resilience, adversely impact their livelihoods, diminish land rights and further threaten food security.

12. In some cases climate change brings opportunities for indigenous peoples for industrial development, resource extraction and transport. The opening of the Arctic Ocean and the North West Passage due to the melting of sea ice are cases in point. However, such developments intensify the question of indigenous peoples' rights to land and sea and to be involved as partners in the elaboration of new activities affecting their territories.

### **(b) Adaptation and coping strategies**

13. Indigenous peoples have always adapted to a changing environment and have developed sophisticated and sustainable strategies to cope with environmental changes. Indigenous peoples interpret and respond to climate change in creative ways, drawing on their traditional knowledge of the natural resource base and other technologies to find solutions. Just as the effects of climate change vary according to specific locations and ecosystems, the strategies employed to cope with these changes vary; from farming in higher altitudes when the mountain glaciers melt to choosing animals and combination of animals with lower food requirements in drought prone areas.

### **(c) Legal and institutional barriers**

14. In spite of a long history of adapting to changing environmental conditions, indigenous peoples today experience that their traditional and other tried coping strategies alone are no longer sufficient to cope with the intensity and frequency of current climatic changes and that various legal and institutional barriers prevent them from coping with climate change and the solutions proposed to address it.

15. The main barrier to indigenous peoples' coping and adaptation capacities is first and foremost the lack of recognition and promotion of their *human rights*. These rights are enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which would be crucial to respect and implement in the context of climate changes. Despite being among those most affected by climate change and the solutions proposed to combat these changes, indigenous peoples' rights and concerns have so far been almost invisible in the climate change discussions at the national, regional and international level.

16. Another barrier is the *lack of involvement of indigenous peoples in decision making processes as well as design and implementation of initiatives to address climate change* at the national, regional and international level. The livelihoods and cultures of indigenous peoples may well depend on their abilities to adapt to climate change and their participation in the shaping of the new forms of economies, governance and livelihoods is necessary to meet the challenge of climate change.

17. Despite international recognition by e.g. the Convention on Biological Diversity, of the importance of indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, the importance of *indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge* has so far not been recognized in relation to climate change. Further, the contributions this knowledge could provide in finding the proper solutions to mitigate the effects of climate change is yet to be acknowledged.

18. Indigenous communities *lack information* about climate change policies and interventions and they are provided with neither *technology* nor *financial resources* to adequately respond to climate change.

### **III. Recommendations**

19. In order to overcome the above-mentioned challenges of indigenous peoples to adequately and effectively responding to climate change, the participants in the Conference adopted the following recommendations directed at the relevant stakeholders. These recommendations are based on the principles of Agenda 21 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and stress notably indigenous peoples' right to participate and to make decisions based on their free and prior informed consent.

**(a) To the Danish Government and Greenland Home Rule**

(i) Take a lead in ensuring indigenous peoples' meaningful participation in COP 15 in Copenhagen in 2009, including the meetings and negotiation processes leading up to COP 15 in Copenhagen and in other climate change meetings and negotiation processes leading up to the 2012 agreement;

(ii) Ensure that the official *Strategy for Danish support to Indigenous Peoples* is implemented in the government's commitment and initiatives to address climate change; and

(iii) Support indigenous peoples' own initiatives to develop mechanisms on how to cope, adapt or mitigate the effects of climate change on their livelihoods and environments.

**(b) To governments and inter-governmental institutions (United Nations agencies, the World Bank Group and regional development banks)**

(i) Ensure full and effective participation of indigenous peoples in the conception, design and implementation of sustainable solutions to combat climate change. Indigenous peoples' right to participate has been confirmed by Agenda 21 and most recently in article 18 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;

(ii) Ensure the full and effective participation of indigenous peoples in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, including the meetings and negotiation processes leading up to COP 15 in Copenhagen;

(iii) Make binding commitments to ensure that climate change policies and programmes potentially affecting indigenous peoples are in full conformity with, and promote the implementation of, international human rights standards, including the United Nations



Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent. This commitment must encompass all multi- and bilateral agreements and initiatives on climate change;

(iv) Make binding commitment to specifically ensure that all agreements made under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change are in full conformity with and promote the implementation of international human rights standards, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent;

(v) Develop mechanisms to avoid ill-conceived climate change mitigation policies and schemes that risk violating the rights of indigenous peoples;

(vi) Respect and take into account indigenous traditional knowledge when identifying and designing climate change mitigation policies and programmes;

(vii) Refrain from supporting policies and programmes that lead to forced eviction of indigenous peoples from their lands and forests in the name of combating climate change;

(viii) Address legal and institutional barriers that prevent indigenous peoples from coping with climate change impacts;

(ix) Develop mechanisms to ensure that information on planned and current mitigation and adaptation schemes is made available to indigenous peoples;

(x) Support initiatives to conduct participatory and multi-disciplinary research with and among indigenous peoples in the context of climate change; and

(xi) Engage in constructive dialogue with civil society partners, especially with indigenous peoples' organizations.

**(c) To universities and research institutes**

(i) Allow for indigenous traditional knowledge to become an integral part of climate change research while ensuring the full and effective participation of indigenous peoples in the research process;

(ii) Identify and promote best practices and lessons that can influence climate change interventions to have positive impacts on indigenous peoples;

(iii) Conduct participatory and multi-disciplinary research with and among indigenous peoples in the context of climate change; and

(iv) Ensure that relevant research is made available to indigenous peoples and to national, regional and international policy makers.

**(d) To civil society partners (international and national)**

(i) Support indigenous peoples' meaningful participation in international and national climate change fora;

(ii) Support indigenous peoples' participation in the search for sustainable solutions to combat climate change;

(iii) Support indigenous peoples' capacities to manoeuvre and negotiate with private companies and governments both in national contexts and in international meetings on climate change issues;

(iv) Support indigenous peoples' networking on climate change issues;

(v) Use the mechanisms of the United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples under the Human Rights Council and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people to further research and advocacy on indigenous peoples' rights in relation to climate change and climate change policies;

(vi) Facilitate dissemination of relevant research, information and documentation to indigenous peoples and partners;

(vii) Engage in constructive dialogue with sectors involved in climate change e.g. energy sector and automobile industry; and

(viii) Advocate and lobby governments, institutions, and private sector to accept and adhere to these recommendations.