

**Fourth session of the  
UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**

**ILO statement under agenda item 3 (a)**

**Goal 1 of the Millennium Development Goals: "Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger",  
addressed under the thematic approach of combating poverty:  
good practices and barriers to implementation.**

The ILO's commitment to the eradication of poverty has been at the centre of its mandate since 1919. The Constitution states: "Poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity anywhere."

The main focus of the ILO's work to eliminate poverty is through creation of employment and work. Employment yields income and skills necessary to emerging from poverty – but the work created must be in conditions that include respect for labour standards to be acceptable work. This is what we are calling a "decent work" agenda.

With indigenous and tribal peoples, the equation may be different. Many are wage earners, but if so they are at the bottom of the economic ladder – subject to abuses such as discrimination, forced labour, child labour including in its most extreme forms, and denial of the right to freedom of association and the ability to bargain collectively – and indeed, of ten denied the very right to take part in the decisions affecting them. They are denied equal wages, and safe and healthy working conditions. The areas where they live and the occupations they follow almost never benefit from labour inspection and police protection. They are likely to be migrant workers, internally or across borders, subjecting them to that many more possibilities of abuse.

ILO works on many different aspects of this, often together with other parts of UN system.

- In particular, the ILO has recently undertaken research on indigenous peoples' participation in poverty reduction strategies, which are intended to lead to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The research comprises a desk review of 14 PRSPs as well as case studies on Cambodia, Cameroon and Nepal. These studies will be made available at a side event being organized by the ILO tomorrow (17 May 2005).
- In general, the research documents that indigenous peoples' rights, needs and aspirations, have not been systematically included in the PRSP processes. Their very identity as peoples has usually been ignored. Although some countries have made progress at the legislative and policy levels, the general conclusion is that much more needs to be done, particularly with regards to building on indigenous peoples' own notions of poverty, including their own priorities for poverty reduction, and involving them in the consultations around PRSP design.
- In some countries that have ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), PRSPs cover in a more systematic and coherent way the structural causes of indigenous and tribal peoples' marginalization and pauperization.
- Research in both Cambodia and Cameroon shows that indigenous peoples are losing their access to traditional lands and resources in accelerated transformation processes, often contemplating a shift from subsistence to market-oriented economies. One of the effects is that hunger has become the main indicator of poverty, indicating that the fundamental food-security of the communities has come under threat. The transition also weakens the cultural

and social resources of the communities that could enable them to deal with the challenges of change itself. Characteristics of the process are loss of indigenous languages, undermining of traditional leadership, inter-generational conflicts and weakening of the traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms.

- Research in Nepal has documented that the situation of poverty and social exclusion of large portions of the indigenous population is closely related to the current armed conflict, but also that the level of conflict is lower in areas where indigenous peoples have maintained social cohesion and traditional governance structures. Although social exclusion has been incorporated as one of the main pillars of the Nepalese PRSP, implementation as well as the establishment of mechanisms for consultation and participation of indigenous peoples remains weak. One important element in this regard is that the donor community seems to lack understanding of indigenous issues and has not yet developed effective strategies and programmes to address the complexity of the situation at the country-level.
- In exploring the multi-faceted situations of poverty it has also become clear that indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable to becoming victims of violations of fundamental labour standards, e.g. relating to child labour, forced labour and discrimination. Recent research undertaken by the ILO, with the participation of the governments concerned, has documented that indigenous peoples are the main victims of forced labour in Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay. We are aware that these are far from unique cases, as has been demonstrated also in the Global Report on Forced Labour released last week. These studies will also be made available tomorrow at the side event.

#### **Implementation barriers:**

In summary, some of the main barriers to the implementation of the MDGs identified through the various research initiatives of the ILO are:

- Reluctance of governments and donors to address indigenous issues, including lack of disaggregated data that can inform operational strategies. This substantiates the common statement of the IASG on the MDGs and indigenous peoples.
- No specific focus on the differentiated situations and strategies of indigenous men and women in poverty reduction efforts.
- Failure to capture indigenous peoples' own notions of poverty, which are often related to the loss of land, language, spiritual values and traditional governance structures, and subsequent imposition of uniform parameters and strategies for measuring and combating poverty.
- Invisibility of indigenous economies - but also their importance for national economies, food security and employment.
- Lack of understanding of the issues in donor and government institutions and weak capacity for implementation of existing policies in support of indigenous people.

It must be understood in particular that there is no single blueprint for combating indigenous peoples' diverse poverty situations. Therefore, consultation with and participation of indigenous peoples, as is stipulated by ILO Convention No. 169, are the key requirements for ensuring inclusion of indigenous rights, needs and priorities in poverty reduction efforts.

It can also be highlighted that while these findings are particularly relevant for indigenous and tribal peoples, they also apply to other identifiable disadvantaged population groups in many countries around the world.

#### **Recommendations:**

The ILO's recent research has clearly demonstrated the urgency of the matter at hand; not only are indigenous peoples often among the poorest sections of societies, in many cases they are also experiencing rapid processes of impoverishment due to their traditional livelihoods being undermined. In order to reverse this situation, the ILO is fully committed to working with the PFII, other IGOs, governments and indigenous partners. We make the following recommendations:

- Consultation with and participation of indigenous peoples should be integral elements of strategies and programmes for combating poverty and should be crucial requirements when assessing the quality of MDG and PRSP-related processes.
- Consultation and participation should be regarded as continuous processes, including not only the design but also the implementation and monitoring of poverty reduction strategies.
- The upcoming Millennium and PRSP reviews provide entry points for the international community to reflect and undertake concerted efforts to discuss and include the situation and rights of indigenous peoples in the policies and programmes for achieving the MDGs.
- In this regard, increased efforts to empower indigenous peoples and build their institutional capacity to engage in these complex and time and resource-demanding processes will be crucial.
- In parallel - in order to move from policy to practice - there is an urgent need to increase the efforts of governments, UN agencies as well as bi- and multilateral donors, particularly at the country-level, to build capacity for ensuring practical implementation of existing policies in support of indigenous peoples.
- Finally, there is a need to ensure that the general work of the agencies is relevant and accessible for indigenous peoples and that indigenous-specific interventions not be isolated from more general work. In the case of the ILO, mainstreaming efforts include incorporating indigenous "decent work agendas" in national strategies and programmes for reducing poverty as well as specifically addressing violations of core labour standards as they affect indigenous peoples.

These studies on which these findings are based will be made available at a side event tomorrow, where we have some of the authors present.