



THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

TOGETHER WE ACHIEVE

Backgrounder - Traditional Knowledge

The theme of the 2019 session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is the generation, transmission and protection of traditional knowledge. This Forum will be an opportunity to identify and share good practices and lessons learned to advance indigenous peoples' rights and set up policy and programmatic recommendations on ways to promote and protect indigenous peoples' rights as well as to ensure the generation, transmission, protection, maintenance and strengthening of traditional knowledge.

Traditional knowledge refers to the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples. Developed from experience gained over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment, traditional knowledge is often transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and can be expressed in stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals etc. It is also the source for the traditional use and management of lands, territories and resources, with indigenous agricultural practices that care for the earth, without depleting the resources. Indigenous peoples follow oral traditions, with dances, paintings, carvings and other artistic expressions, that are practiced and passed down through millennia.

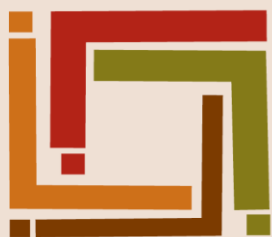
Traditional knowledge is at the core of indigenous peoples' identities, cultural heritage and livelihoods. The transmission of traditional knowledge across generations is fundamental to protecting and promoting indigenous peoples' cultures and identities and as well as the sustainability of livelihoods, resilience to human-made and natural disasters, and sustaining culturally appropriate economic development. Traditional knowledge underlines indigenous peoples' holistic approach of life, which is a central element of the world's cultural and biological diversity.

Challenges

Global histories of ongoing colonialism, racism, exploitation and dispossession of indigenous peoples have led to structural inequalities and societal exclusion and vulnerability. These processes that have also undermined and undervalued traditional knowledge.

Indigenous languages, which encompass tremendous traditional knowledge related to conservation and ecological systems and offer opportunities for preserving biodiversity and maintaining cultural diversity, are also under threat. Designating 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages is the United Nations General Assembly's effort to protect and preserve indigenous languages, and thereby, protect traditional knowledge.





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Value

There is a growing appreciation of the value of traditional knowledge. Traditional knowledge is valuable not only to those who depend on it in their daily lives, but to modern industry and agriculture. Traditional knowledge about land and species conservation and management and revitalization of biological resources conservation is grounded in the daily lives and practices of indigenous peoples and their close understanding of their environments cultivated over thousands of years.

It has the potential to play a crucial role in sustainable development and for addressing the most pressing global problems, such as climate change, land management, land conservation, and to strengthen scientific, technological and medical research, as evidenced in inter alia pharmaceuticals. Furthermore, traditional knowledge can offer promising avenues for achieving food security for not only indigenous peoples but for inhabitants around the globe. Many indigenous land and environmental management practices have been proven to enhance and promote biodiversity at the local level and aid in maintaining healthy ecosystems.

Educational practices that combine indigenous traditional knowledge and languages are a significant way to maintain and preserve indigenous cultures, identities, reduce illiteracy and school dropout rates, enhance learning, protect the environment, and promote wellbeing.

Traditional Knowledge and the UN

Recognizing the importance of traditional knowledge, the right of indigenous peoples to promote, maintain and safeguard their traditional knowledge is enshrined in several international normative and policy instruments. The UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) emphasizes the protection of indigenous peoples' rights to their traditional knowledge (Article 31). The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) also recognizes the close ties of indigenous peoples and local communities to biological resources, and the contributions that traditional knowledge can make to the Convention and sustainable biological diversity (article 8(j)). The CBD has established a working group to address the implementation and protection of traditional knowledge to this end. Other UN entities also have relevant policies and programmes that recognize the role of traditional knowledge in securing the rights of indigenous peoples as elaborated in the UN Declaration.

The Forum's 2019 session aims to contribute to the increasing recognition and respect for traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples, based on their right to self-determination and decide their own development priorities. This is important in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which calls for leaving no one behind.

