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DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
Division for Inclusive Social Development
Indigenous Peoples and Development Branch - Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on
Indigenous Issues

International Expert Group Meeting on the theme

“Indigenous Peoples in a Greening Economy”

23 to 25 January 2024, Boulder, Colorado, USA

Concept Note

Prepared by the Indigenous Peoples and Development Branch -
Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Division for Inclusive Social Development
Department of Economic and Social Affairs
United Nations

A. Introduction and Purpose of the meeting

Within the Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD) of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the Indigenous Peoples and Development Branch, which serves as the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, is organizing an international expert group meeting on “Indigenous Peoples in a Greening Economy”, which will take place from 23 to 25 January 2024 in Boulder, Colorado, USA.

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (the Permanent Forum) is an advisory body of the Economic and Social Council, mandated to discuss economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. The Forum promotes respect for and full application of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the Declaration) and follows up on its effectiveness (Art. 42).

In the expert group meeting, which was approved by the Economic and Social Council in decision 2023/339, the following topics will be discussed:

1. Indigenous Peoples’ relationship with the environment.
2. Factors that enable or obstruct the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the green economy.
3. Case studies on the positive and negative effects of green entrepreneurship and green enterprise on Indigenous Peoples and their communities.
4. Human rights and corporate responsibility in the shift to a green economy.

A key objective of the expert group meeting will be to develop strategic guidance and action-oriented recommendations for States, intergovernmental organizations, private companies, the United Nations system and Indigenous Peoples’ organizations to ensure and protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples in the transition towards a more sustainable economy.

B. Background

Although Indigenous Peoples account for only around 5 percent of the world’s population, they effectively manage an estimated 20-25 percent of the Earth’s land surface. This land coincides with areas that hold 80 percent of the planet’s biodiversity and about 40 percent of protected areas and ecologically intact landscapes. Since Indigenous Peoples first came to the United Nations, they have emphasized the fundamental importance of the relationship with their lands, territories and resources, highlighting their cultural and spiritual significance and value. This physical inheritance constitutes the basis for the continued existence of their societies. Indeed, to

survive as distinct peoples, Indigenous Peoples and their communities need to be able to own, preserve and manage their lands, territories, and resources.¹

In 2010, the Permanent Forum noted that “climate change has heightened the urgency to alter the dominant development model not only for the sake of Indigenous Peoples but for the whole of humanity and the planet. The climate change crisis is a direct result of the unabated dumping of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere caused by a fossil-fuel-based economic model and the over-exhaustion of natural resources such as forests, peat lands, grasslands, soils, and the like. Indigenous Peoples disproportionately suffer from the serious impacts of climate change because they are mainly dependent on the integrity of their ecosystems for their survival and because of their impoverishment”.² Indigenous women are even more vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, due to their traditional responsibilities as food growers, water and fuel gatherers, and caregivers, which connect them even more intimately to available natural resources and to the natural environment.

Therefore, despite the recognition of the key role of Indigenous Peoples in achieving sustainable development, they often find themselves on the frontlines of the negative effects of climate change, that are destroying their communities, cultures and means of subsistence. Moreover, the Permanent Forum has noted how Indigenous Peoples are frequently negatively affected by “climate change solutions”³, such as the green economy, which have at times led to violations of their rights, including through mineral extraction, the building of hydroelectric dams and other large-scale infrastructure without their free, prior and informed consent.

Additionally, national budgetary conditions of some developing countries are quite limited. Funding gaps may be filled by multilateral development banks and foreign direct investment, which offer financial assistance to enable these countries to embark on a green development pathway, but often utilizing the lands and territories of Indigenous Peoples. Moreover, incentives related to the green economy or market mechanisms in general are introducing the logic of individualism and competition in Indigenous Peoples’ communities, changing the way they relate to nature and to each other as collectivities and leading to conflicts over land and resources. For example, the model of the international climate change policy REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) has been criticized for undermining Indigenous Peoples’ fundamental rights and potentially leading to a mass land grab⁴.

A “green economy” is an economy that aims at reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcity and that pursues sustainable development without degrading the environment. The transition towards a green economy is needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those on climate action, economic growth, justice and well-being.⁵

¹ See <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2021/03/State-of-Worlds-Indigenous-Peoples-Vol-V-Final.pdf>

² See E/C.19/2010/14, para. 26

³ See <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/climate-solutions>

⁴ See <https://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2011/11/reality-redd-peru-between-theory-and-practice-november-2011.pdf>

⁵ See <https://unric.org/en/green-economy-a-path-towards-sustainable-development-and-poverty-eradication/>

Nevertheless, the transition to a green economy is challenging the rights of Indigenous Peoples due to conflicting interests and varying capacities and contexts.

In 2008, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) launched the Green Economy Initiative (GEI), a programme of global research and country-level assistance designed to motivate policymakers to support environmental investments. In 2015, the concept evolved into the Inclusive Green Economy (IGE) with UNEP's publication "Uncovering pathways towards an inclusive green economy".⁶ The document defined an inclusive green economy as one that improves human well-being and builds social equity while reducing environmental risks and scarcities. The concept provides an alternative to today's dominant economic model, which exacerbates inequalities, encourages waste, triggers resource shortages and harms both the environment and human health.

There is no doubt that recent global challenges, including the financial crisis, climate change and the energy, water and food crises, are proof of the failure of an unsustainable economic development model. Moreover, the transition to a green economy without the right framework or while disregarding Indigenous Peoples' rights will continue to produce historical injustices, marginalization, discrimination and dispossession of their land and resources. The green economy offers an opportunity to reinvigorate international efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Declaration to empower Indigenous Peoples' systems of governance, strengthen their economic and social systems, improve their health, enrich their educational, cultural and spiritual lives, and safeguard their knowledge systems and natural resources.

Furthermore, to meet the challenge of creating more sustainable and climate-sensitive development pathways, incorporating the vision, concepts and practices of Indigenous Peoples should be a requirement for the implementation of any green economy process. As the key role of Indigenous Peoples in protecting the environment has been highlighted, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity & Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has recognized that respecting Indigenous Peoples, their knowledge and diverse values can lead to more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

Moving towards a green economy and appropriate climate change mitigation measures requires States, governments, the private sector and donors to engage in the transition collaboratively with Indigenous Peoples as partners at all levels, and not only as beneficiaries or stakeholders. Moreover, Indigenous organizations, including Indigenous women, youth, elders and persons with disabilities, must participate as right-holders in decision-making, and their free, prior and informed consent must be respected. Indigenous Peoples should receive direct funding to address their own priorities and needs for their development, in line with the principle of self-determination. Where intermediaries are necessary, decision-making processes must remain with Indigenous Peoples and capacity-building and mentoring initiatives should be provided.

⁶ See <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/uncovering-pathways-towards-inclusive-green-economy-summary-leaders>

C. International Framework

Indigenous Peoples' rights are recognized in international law under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and under the International Labor Organization's (ILO's) Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of 1989 (No. 169). Their rights have also been developed in a separate body of international jurisprudence referring to the rights of Indigenous Peoples, including UN human rights treaty bodies and ILO 169 monitoring bodies.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, recognizes the right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination (articles 3 and 4), the collective right to own and control their lands and resources (articles 25-27), their right to free, prior and informed consent in relation to legislation, measures and projects that may have an impact on their rights (articles 10, 11, 19, 28, 29 and 32) and their right to participate in decision-making processes (articles 5, 18 and 27). Ensuring the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples to lands, territories and resources is important not only for their well-being, but also for addressing some of the most pressing global challenges, including climate change and environmental degradation.

Further, the reports of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples prepared a report for the Human Rights Council in September 2023 on the topic; "Green financing, a transition to protect Indigenous Peoples' rights" ([A/HRC/54/31](#)) and of the Expert Mechanism of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on "The Impact of Militarization on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" ([A/HRC/54/52](#)).also focus on both the positive and negative impacts of development on Indigenous Peoples, and the linkages with sustainable development and provide recommendations to address them.

In recent decades, there have been improvements in intergovernmental processes related to the recognition of not only Indigenous Peoples' individual rights, but also their collective rights as distinct groups. For instance, in 2022 the Convention on Biological Diversity formulated new targets⁷ to protect 30 percent of the world's lands, inland waters, and coastal and marine areas by 2030, providing an unprecedented emphasis on the importance of recognizing and respecting Indigenous and traditional territories. The acknowledgement of and respect for Indigenous Peoples' rights is a testament to their sustainable management of over 38 million km² of land, across 87 countries or politically distinct areas on all inhabited continents.⁸

D. Objectives of the Meeting:

The overall objective of the expert group meeting is to draw attention and mobilize action to more fully integrate the distinct needs and priorities of Indigenous Peoples into the

⁷ See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/dec/20/cop15-montreal-did-it-deliver-for-natural-world-aoe>

⁸ See <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/fee.2148#fee2148-bib-0010>

implementation of the 2030 Agenda based on their diverse views of poverty, well-being and sustainable development.

1. Documenting United Nations mechanisms/bodies or others that support the transition to a green economy while considering the rights of Indigenous Peoples.
2. Identifying key considerations based on sustainability and a human rights approach when transitioning to a green economy.
3. Assessing structural/institutional barriers that prevent the participation of Indigenous Peoples in sustainable development processes.
4. Identifying Indigenous-led initiatives for a just and sustainable transition, acknowledging the importance of both the technological and scientific tools but also traditional and ancestral knowledge of Indigenous Peoples.
5. Preparing policy recommendations for all relevant stakeholders.

E. Organization of the meeting

Indigenous Peoples' organizations, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, Member States, non-governmental organizations, and academia are invited to attend the expert group meeting.

Invited experts will prepare papers to present at the meeting on one or more topics mentioned above.

Experts are requested to submit their papers (8 pages maximum) to the organizers by 17 December so that the papers can be distributed before the meeting. Experts will also be informed in due course of the meeting's programme of work and the appropriate time to present their papers during the meeting.

F. Working Languages:

The working languages will be English and Spanish.

G. Contact Information:

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