



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES INDIGENOUS VOICES

Backgrounder

## Climate change and indigenous peoples

*"I am convinced that climate change, and what we do about it, will define us, our era, and ultimately the global legacy we leave for future generations. Today, the time for doubt has passed."*

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 24 September 2007

As the plight of indigenous peoples and the role they may play in combating climate change are rarely considered in public discourses on climate change, the **United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**, through its Secretariat and its upcoming seventh session, is well placed to support indigenous peoples in putting a "human face" on this issue. The special theme for the session, which runs from 21 April to 2 May 2008 in New York, is "**Climate change, bio-cultural diversity and livelihoods: the stewardship role of indigenous peoples and new challenges**".

### ❖ The effects of climate change on indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples are among the first to face the direct consequences of climate change, owing to their dependence upon, and close relationship with the environment and its resources. Climate change exacerbates the difficulties already faced by vulnerable indigenous communities, including political and economic marginalization, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination and unemployment. Examples include:

- In the high altitude regions of the Himalayas, glacial melts affecting hundreds of millions of rural dwellers who depend on the seasonal flow of water is resulting in more water in the short term, but less in the long run as glaciers and snow cover shrink.
- In the Amazon, the effects of climate change include deforestation and forest fragmentation, and consequently, more carbon released into the atmosphere exacerbating and creating further changes. Droughts in 2005 resulted in fires in the western Amazon region. This is likely to occur again as rainforest is replaced by savannas, thus having a huge affect on the livelihoods of the indigenous peoples in the region.
- Indigenous peoples in the Arctic region depend on hunting for polar bears, walrus, seals and caribou, herding reindeer, fishing and gathering, not only for food to support the local economy, but also as the basis for their cultural and social identity. Some of the concerns facing indigenous peoples there include the change in species and availability of traditional food sources, perceived reduction in weather predictions and the safety of traveling in changing ice and weather conditions, posing serious challenges to human health and food security.
- In Finland, Norway and Sweden, rain and mild weather during the winter season often prevents reindeer from accessing lichen, which is a vital food source. This has caused massive loss of reindeer, which are vital to the culture, subsistence and economy of Saami communities. Reindeer herders must, as a result, feed their herds with fodder, which is expensive and not economically viable in the long term.
- Rising temperatures, dune expansion, increased wind speeds, and loss of vegetation are negatively impacting traditional cattle and goat farming practices of indigenous peoples in Africa's Kalahari Basin, who must now live around government-drilled bores in order to access water and depend on government support for their survival.



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### ❖ Responding to climate change

Climate change poses threats and dangers to the survival of indigenous communities worldwide, even though indigenous peoples contribute little to greenhouse emissions. In fact, indigenous peoples are vital to, and active in, the many ecosystems that inhabit their lands and territories, and may therefore help enhance the resilience of these ecosystems. In addition, indigenous peoples interpret and react to the impacts of climate change in creative ways, drawing on traditional knowledge and other technologies to find solutions which may help society at large to cope with impending changes. Examples include:

- In Bangladesh, villagers are creating floating vegetable gardens to protect their livelihoods from flooding, while in Vietnam, communities are helping to plant dense mangroves along the coast to diffuse tropical-storm waves.
- Indigenous peoples in the Central, South American and Caribbean regions are shifting their agricultural activities and their settlements to new locations which are less susceptible to adverse climate conditions. For example, indigenous peoples in Guyana are moving from their savannah homes to forest areas during droughts and have started planting cassava, their main staple crop, on moist floodplains which are normally too wet for other crops.
- In North America, some indigenous groups are striving to cope with climate change by focusing on the economic opportunities that it may create. For example, the increased demand for renewable energy using wind and solar power could make tribal lands an important resource for such energy, replacing fossil fuel-derived energy and limiting greenhouse gas emissions. The Great Plains could provide a tremendous wind resource and its development could help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well as alleviate the management problem of the Missouri River hydropower, helping to maintain water levels for power generation, navigation, and recreation. In addition, there may be opportunities for carbon sequestration.

### ❖ Drawbacks and difficulties of responding to climate change

World leaders attending the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali in December 2007 agreed that addressing climate change effectively requires mitigation, adaptation, new technology and financing.

It is important to note that enhancing and supporting the adaptive capacity of indigenous peoples will only be successful if this is integrated with other strategies such as disaster preparation, land-use planning, environmental conservation and national plans for sustainable development.

In many instances, adaptation to new conditions requires additional financial resources and the transfer of technological capacity that most indigenous communities do not possess. While short-term adaptation activities are underway, resource and capacity constraints are limiting the implementation of long-term strategies.

Some mitigation measures may have undesirable direct and indirect consequences for indigenous communities. For instance, certain agricultural initiatives may reduce greenhouse gas emissions but may lead to an increase in monoculture crops and plantations and an associated decline in biodiversity and food security. The full and effective participation of indigenous communities is crucial to the elaboration of State-developed mitigation measures to ensure that such schemes do not negatively affect vulnerable communities.

Indigenous peoples who choose or are forced to migrate away from their traditional lands often face double discrimination as both migrants and as indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples may be more vulnerable to irregular migration such as trafficking and smuggling, owing to sudden displacement by a climactic event, limited legal migration options and limited opportunities to make informed choices. Deforestation, particularly in developing countries, is pushing indigenous families to migrate to cities for economic reasons, often ending up in urban slums.





### ❖ **Additional information**

**For more information on the Seventh Session**, please visit:  
[http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/session\\_seventh.html](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/session_seventh.html)

**For interviews with UN officials and indigenous leaders**, please contact: Nancy Groves, Department of Public Information, tel: 917-367-7083, e-mail: [mediainfo@un.org](mailto:mediainfo@un.org)

**For Secretariat of the UN Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues**, please contact: Mirian Masaquiza, Secretariat of UNPFII, tel: 917-367-6006, e-mail: [IndigenousPermanentForum@un.org](mailto:IndigenousPermanentForum@un.org)

**Gateway to the UN System's Work on Climate Change:** <http://www.un.org/climatechange/>

**United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change:** <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>

**Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change:** <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

**United Nations Environment Programme:** <http://www.unep.org/>

### ❖ **Sources consulted**

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*Report of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Working Group 2: Climate Change Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, 2007. Available online at <http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-wg2.htm>.

Salick, Jan and Anja Byg. *Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change*. Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. Oxford: May 2007. Available online at <http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/publications/Indigenouspeoples.pdf>.

