

THE UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

TOGETHER WE ACHIEVE

17th Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Regional Dialogue: The Pacific

Tues 24 April, 10am-1pm CR 8

Background:

The Pacific Islands are home to a diverse range of indigenous peoples speaking 19 per cent of the world's estimated 5,000 languages. Indigenous peoples in the Pacific are still linked to their communal lands, belief systems, spirituality and customary laws which forms the basis of their social, economic and political systems.

Due to the diversity of Pacific countries and territories, there are significant variations in the social, political and economic situation of indigenous peoples in the region. The small developing states of the Pacific face specific environmental, social and economic challenges that have significant impacts on indigenous peoples exercising their human rights

Issues relevant to indigenous peoples of the Pacific region:

- **Climate Change**

Pacific island states are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Traditionally, the indigenous peoples of the Pacific have managed their environment, including the oceans, seabed and environs, sustainably to benefit all peoples and future generations.

Environmental threats, including climate change and pollution, have negatively affected the rights of indigenous peoples of the Pacific. The detrimental effects of climate change threaten not only their existence, but also the continuation of their cultures. Rising sea levels result in severely reduced food production and reduction in potable drinking water.

The flow-on effects include relocation of families and attendant alienation from their cultures and wider family structures. That threat aggravates the already vulnerable position of small island Pacific States. Overfishing and the destruction and exploitation of natural resources through deep sea mining further exacerbate those threats.

Indigenous peoples of the Pacific are especially vulnerable to climate change. It is essential that effective measures are taken to remove obstacles and strengthen support to meet the needs of the indigenous peoples of the Pacific who are facing complex humanitarian emergencies because of climate change.

The UN Green Climate Fund (GCF) Indigenous Peoples Policy recognizes that indigenous peoples often have identities and aspirations that are distinct from mainstream groups in national societies and are disadvantaged by traditional models of mitigation, adaptation and development. This Policy





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will assist the GCF in incorporating considerations related to indigenous peoples into its decision-making while working towards the goals of climate change mitigation and adaptation.

In addition, the UN recently launched the International Decade for Action: Water for Sustainable Development 2018-2028 aiming to further improve cooperation, partnership and capacity development to highlight the integrated management of water resources.

- **Migration/Urban drift**

The issue of migration is central to the Pacific region. Today, a high percentage of Pacific Islanders reside overseas in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America. In some smaller countries, the number of people living overseas is greater than the number of peoples who remain on their island home.

With no viable economic alternatives, indigenous peoples move to urban settings in search of job opportunities and economic security, often with the aim of supporting their home community through remittances. In New Zealand, the drift from rural to the urban areas is high with over 80 per cent of Maori living in urban centers.

Indigenous peoples who migrate to urban areas in the region face discrimination owing to their indigenous identity. Vulnerable to exploitation, they often do not enjoy basic rights, being subjected to limited access to health services, inadequate housing and unemployment.

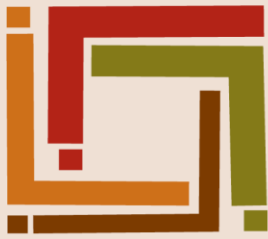
The Global Compact on Migration (GCM), the first intergovernmental UN agreement negotiated to cover all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner, recognizes that states have the obligation to protect internally displaced populations and communities affected by these issues—including indigenous peoples.

- **Employment/ access to labor market**

Beyond traditional activities, a lack of education and skills, together with non-recognition of their traditional skills, creates formidable obstacles to the participation by indigenous peoples in the formal economy and blocks their access to many opportunities. In Australia and New Zealand, the skills deficit that is widespread among indigenous peoples poses severe challenges to the world of work, as it sets limitations on their participation as both employees and entrepreneurs.

In 2011, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians aged between 15 and 64 were less likely to be participating in the labor force than non-indigenous people by a margin of 20.5 percentage points.





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Even though in recent years New Zealand has made significant strides in advancing the rights of Maori people and has a strong welfare system, a 2014 study has observed that many of the inequality indicators between Europeans and Maori remain high.

- **Relevant PFI Recommendations:**

14th Session:

- **Paragraph 021:** Reiterating the recommendation made at its seventh session, the Permanent Forum recommends that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration focus on the vulnerability of indigenous peoples in the Pacific region, in particular in view of the effects of climate change (see E/2008/43-E/C.19/2008/13, chap. 1, sect. B, para. 59).
- **Paragraph 044:** The Permanent Forum appoints Valmaine Toki to conduct a study on the relationship between indigenous peoples and the Pacific Ocean, taking into account issues of governance, the effects of climate change, deep sea mining, resources and sustainable development.

15th Session:

- **Paragraph 014:** In the light of the study by Ms. Toki on the relationship between indigenous peoples and the Pacific Ocean and the dire effects of climate change, such as forced relocation and the loss of culture and livelihood, on vulnerable small island Pacific States, the Permanent Forum recommends that United Nations entities, including UN-Oceans, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and UNESCO, in addition to the International Seabed Authority, comply with and implement the relevant articles of the United Nations Declaration (arts. 18, 27 and 32), so as to ensure the full and effective participation of indigenous peoples. This should include meaningful participation, such as dedicated indigenous representation within each of these United Nations entities, and regard for indigenous peoples' world views.
- **Paragraph 016:** Recalling the study on decolonization of the Pacific region (see E/C.19/2013/12), the Permanent Forum invites the relevant States to provide information on the status of the situation of the indigenous peoples concerned to the Permanent Forum at its sixteenth session.

16th Session:

Potentially relevant for the Pacific Islands:

- **Paragraph 037:** The Permanent Forum calls upon Member States to start the work, in the context of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, of creating a place and a voice for indigenous peoples in the governance of the world's oceans. This effort involves





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the participation of indigenous peoples in all aspects of the work and decision-making regarding the Convention on the Law of the Sea, including the environmental provisions and the delimitation of the continental shelf. It may also include establishing advisory committees of indigenous peoples to guide the work under the Convention, as has been done under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

- **Paragraph 038:** The Permanent Forum calls upon the United Nations bodies and Member States to ensure that indigenous peoples have a voice equal to States in the development of and negotiations on the international agreement to address marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. States and the United Nations should guarantee that the agreement upholds and respects indigenous peoples' role in governing the oceans and the rights set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Possible discussion questions:

- What are the key areas of concern for the Pacific region?
 - How should Permanent Forum Members seek to address these concerns?
- What best practices exist in the Pacific region related to the 6 mandated areas of the UNPFII (economic and social development, culture, environment, education, health and human rights)?
- What policies are needed to advance the rights of indigenous peoples in the Pacific?

