

*Excerpt from DESA framework for technical cooperation in countries with indigenous peoples (November 2005)*

## **1. Identifying Indigenous Peoples in diverse contexts**

The first question that may arise is “who is indigenous?” In the more than thirty-year history of indigenous issues at the United Nations, and the ever longer history in the ILO on this question, considerable thinking and debate have been devoted to the question of definition of “indigenous peoples”.

Indigenous peoples are the holders of unique languages, knowledge systems and beliefs, possess invaluable knowledge and practices for the sustainable management of natural resources and have a special relation to and use of their traditional land, whereby their ancestral land and territory has a fundamental importance for their collective physical and cultural survival as peoples. Indigenous peoples hold their own diverse concepts of development, based on their own diverse values, visions, needs and priorities.

In addition, indigenous peoples often have much in common with other marginalized segments of societies, i.e. lack of political representation and participation, economic marginalization and poverty, lack of access to social services and overall marginalization and discrimination.

Considering the diversity of indigenous peoples, an official definition of “indigenous peoples” has not been adopted by any UN-system body; in fact UN bodies have decided not to define the term<sup>1</sup>. The UN system however has developed a modern understanding of this term, including through the Martinez Cobo Study on the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations<sup>2</sup>, as well as ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries<sup>3</sup>, the policy of the Asian Development Bank<sup>4</sup> and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights<sup>5</sup>. The following general characteristics of indigenous peoples are highlighted:

- Self-identification as indigenous peoples and, at the individual level, accepted by the community as their member.
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources
- Distinct social, economic or political systems
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs
- Form non-dominant groups of society
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> The UN has also not defined various other terms, including “peoples” and “minorities”.

<sup>2</sup> UN Doc. No. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1986/87

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/convdisp2.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Asian Development Bank: Policy on Indigenous Peoples [www.adb.org/IndigenousPeoples/default.asp](http://www.adb.org/IndigenousPeoples/default.asp)

<sup>5</sup> Report of the African Commission’s Working Group of experts on Indigenous Populations/Communities. [www.iwgia.org](http://www.iwgia.org)

- **The most fruitful approach is to identify, rather than define, indigenous peoples in a specific context and most importantly based on the fundamental criterion of self-identification as underlined in a number of human rights documents.**
- **The term “indigenous” has prevailed as a general term in some countries, there may be preference for other terms “indigenous peoples”. There are some local terms (such as tribes, first peoples, aboriginals, ethnic groups, *adivasi*, *janajati*) or occupational and geographical (hunter-gatherers, nomads, peasants, hill people, rural populations etc.) that, for all practical purposes, can be used interchangeably with “indigenous peoples”.**
- **In many cases, the notion of being indigenous has pejorative connotations and some people may choose not to reveal or redefine their origin. External actors must respect such choices, while at the same time working against the discrimination of indigenous peoples.**