

# Assessing the First UN Decade of Indigenous Peoples in Asia: Achievements and Gaps

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Tamang Shamans of Nepal

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**Even as caste, class, and gender, the three traditional poles of social inclusion, continue to remain important in the ongoing discussions on indigenous people, a fourth pole: ethnicity and indigeneity, has come centre-stage in a contemporary era marked by ethnic strife and conflict in many parts of the world.**

The identity of the 'indigenous' has now been accepted as legitimate, underscored by the direct correlation between their political and economic marginalisation, cultural stigmatisation, and their lack of rights and persistent poverty. With the focus on social inclusion, participatory development and the 'rights-based approach', which makes an intrinsic link between the right to development and human rights, development agencies have over the last two decades increasingly turned their attention to indigenous peoples around the world. Several initiatives have been promoted to empower indigenous peoples. Perhaps the most significant was the declaration by the United Nations of 1995-2004 as the first 'International Decade of Indigenous People'. As this Decade came to a close, it was followed immediately with the pronouncement of a second Decade (2005-2014), indicating that many issues from the first remained unresolved.

In 2005, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in collaboration with ICIMOD and the Tebtebba Foundation, embarked upon an assessment of the first Decade in ten countries in Asia – a continent that is home to 70% of the world's indigenous peoples. An assessment of the first Decade came at a critical juncture, where the reflection on the successes and failures of the Decade and an analysis of the outstanding issues could serve as a benchmark and baseline upon which strategies and actions for the second decade could be developed. While this defined the broader objective of the assessment, a more specific focus of enquiry was to examine how pronouncements such as this at the international level, at the behest of institutions like the United Nations, translate into concrete changes at the policy and programme levels in individual countries. The ten countries covered by the assessment were Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, and Nepal, by ICIMOD; and Cambodia, Indonesia,

Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, by the Tebtebba Foundation. This article provides a glimpse into some of the findings emerging from the assessment.

## Disaggregating the overall Impact of the Decade

The overall impact of the Decade could be disaggregated on two levels. First, by looking at the changes at the international level, and more specifically within the UN system compared to changes at the national levels. Second, by gauging the perception of the impact of the Decade as seen in how awareness of it differs among indigenous activists and the common indigenous person at the grassroots.

The most marked achievement of the Decade at the international level was the creation of a heightened awareness on indigenous peoples issues, which in turn exerted what may be called an intangible moral pressure on UN agencies and nation-states to address, in some way, the issue of marginalisation of indigenous peoples. At the level of the UN system, the creation of a 'Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues' as a space where, for the first time, indigenous people and states could discuss among themselves and with each other the problems they face, has been the most significant achievement. The Permanent Forum meets once a year and makes recommendations to the Economic and Social Council. Some UN agencies such as IFAD, ILO, and UNDP have been more active than others in developing specific policies and programmes for indigenous peoples. Yet, ironically, the level of awareness about the Decade amongst the staff of these agencies at the country level was quite low. The

lack of coordination amongst UN agencies on thematic issues was again reflected through this Decade. Lack of sufficient funds has been cited as one of the reasons by the UN itself as a reason for its limited activities during the Decade.

Further, the limited influence of the UN within the context of the sovereignty of nation-states must be kept in mind, especially on issues of indigenous peoples. Indicative of this is that most states still do not accord official legitimacy to the term indigenous, leave alone 'peoples', but refer to them variously as tribals, ethnic minorities, traditional people, upland people, amongst others, and that no state in Asia has ratified ILO Convention 169 (with the exception of Nepal, where ratification is in process).

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### The most significant achievement of the Decade is heightened awareness on indigenous peoples' issues around the world.

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The level of awareness of the Decade, its objectives, and 'Programme of Activities', differed radically between indigenous leaders and activists who have had the opportunity to take part in meetings of the UN and other conferences at the international level, or are active in lobbying for rights at the national level, and the common indigenous person at the grassroots level. In fact, several indigenous people have made allegations that the UN system did not encourage a more inclusive, wide-ranging, or rotational participation in its processes, leading to new forms of power and hierarchy amongst indigenous peoples themselves.

That awareness of the Decade did not permeate the grassroots, in turn, points to the need to ensure greater responsibility on the part of indigenous leaders to create awareness, as well as the need for agencies to make greater investments in awareness creation and capacity building at different levels. Without this, Decades such as this do not touch the lives of the common indigenous person in any way, unless the mere objective is to promote negotiations at the international level.

Those aware of the Decade, however, unequivocally stated that one of its most valuable outcomes was to foster greater solidarity amongst indigenous peoples in different parts of the world. The course of the Decade saw the formation of several indigenous peoples' organisations and networks that are at the



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Virtually no projects were implemented by the states for indigenous people despite the Decade (Nagaland, India)

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forefront of advocacy for indigenous peoples' rights in their respective countries. The celebration of the 'International Day of Indigenous Peoples' every 9 August has become a symbolic marker of the struggle and solidarity of indigenous peoples around the world, while also contributing to raising awareness on indigenous peoples issues in civil society.

### Policy changes

In the last decade several policy changes, both positive and negative, can be seen in most countries, which directly or indirectly have an influence on the lives of indigenous peoples. However, these changes cannot be attributed directly to the Decade. They would have taken place regardless of the Decade and were more an outcome of the long struggles that indigenous peoples have been waging. Major changes have been often an outcome of changes in political regimes in some countries (e.g., in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Nepal), which created spaces for renegotiating the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Where positive policies and laws do exist from the perspective of indigenous peoples, there is a lack of political commitment in effective implementation. Further, the policy terrain is a disordered one, with contradictions and a lack of coordination among different sectorial policies, particularly under the pressure of new economic imperatives driven by neo-liberal policies and globalisation, which are not always conducive to indigenous peoples rights. Budgetary allocations, for example, reveal that there is a dramatic shift away from investment in agriculture to industry. Two broad areas where this trend is especially visible are in the increasing exploitation of indigenous peoples lands and territories by extractive industries, and the leasing out of lands for plantations. In many areas, indigenous peoples are also experiencing a loss of land to politically-induced settlement of lowland, non-indigenous people in upland areas. Many positive policies are also limited by conditionalities, the pre-eminent one being the exercise of the principle of the 'eminent domain' of the state.

### Programmes

Several programmes and projects have been implemented to further the rights of indigenous peoples. However, like in the case of policies, they

do not bear any direct correlation to the Decade. Most of the programmes have been implemented by non-government organisations with the support of international donor agencies. At least with specific reference to the Decade, the states implemented virtually no projects. A major thrust of donor support has been in infrastructure development and income generation as part of poverty alleviation projects. Some indigenous people's groups have criticised these programmes as promoting conventional models of development rather than challenging them, often demonstrating little sensitivity to the cultural difference and special resources of indigenous peoples. Even cultural tourism projects, for instance, tend to commoditise and make a spectacle of indigenous culture rather than ensure the dynamic aspects of genuine survival. Indigenous people have also expressed that the work carried out by UN agencies is governed by complex regulations and bureaucratic procedures, with most of the communication often carried out in languages difficult for indigenous people to access.

### Conclusion

Some important concrete recommendations for action in the second decade that emerged from the assessment include the following:

- ▶ The need for disaggregated data that will strengthen the case for indigenous peoples' rights;
- ▶ Capacity building of indigenous peoples to use and monitor national and international instruments to promote and protect their rights;
- ▶ The need for a mechanism within the UN system to ensure the compliance of states to international conventions and treaties;
- ▶ The need to establish mechanisms and provide support to existing conventions and treaties that will actively promote awareness raising, capacity building, and translation of relevant documents into the local languages;
- ▶ The need to promote culturally sensitive poverty alleviation and development programmes that take into account the diverse needs of indigenous peoples rather than imposing standardised packages; and
- ▶ The need to set up activities on sharing and learning for non-indigenous persons, governments, civil society, and the media on indigenous issues in order to increase awareness and recognition of cultural diversity.