Indigenous Peoples and the Millennium Development Goals

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz - Tebtebba Foundation

Introduction

The Millennium Declaration, which was agreed upon by Heads of States during the Millennium Summit of 2000, is the foundation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The eight goals are claimed to be the distillation of the goals and targets set by the global United Nations conferences of the nineties. Whatever the criteria that were used to determine the content of the goals, indigenous peoples are invisible in the MDGs. Despite overwhelming empirical evidence of acute poverty among indigenous peoples, the MDG country reports that have been produced in recent years, for example, do not address themselves to their situation.

Indigenous peoples see a number of limitations in the MDGs and in the discourse surrounding them. First, they are not shaped within a rights-based framework. For indigenous peoples, it is not feasible to talk of development without addressing issues of recognition of and respect for their basic collective and individual human rights. Second, there is no attention in the current MDG debates to the structural causes of indigenous poverty that lie in a development paradigm that negates indigenous peoples’ economic, political and socio-cultural systems, discrimination and social exclusion, continuing colonization, unsustainable debts of governments, among others. Third, indigenous peoples are invisible in country-wise assessments of progress on the MDGs because of the focus of these reports on general averages, which do not reflect the realities of specific groups of people.

Notwithstanding these questions and reservations, indigenous peoples and their organizations have started to explore the ways in which the MDGs can trickle down to some of the world’s indigenous peoples.1

1 The working definition of indigenous peoples formulated by the Special Rapporteur for the Sub-Commission, José Martinez Cobo, in his study, “The Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations” (1986), says, “Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own
They are focusing their advocacy efforts towards governments and intergovernmental organizations and raising issues of basic rights to lands and resources, culture and identity, and self-determination as part of the debate on the MDGs.

A meeting at the United Nations to follow up on the Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s visit to Latin America in late 2003 acknowledged that indigenous peoples “are at the bottom of the scale in the Latin American countries with regard the Millennium Development Goals – be it poverty, hunger and education.” The meeting recommended that the “linkage between indigenous issues and development work be strengthened ... A large number of the grievances from the indigenous peoples were linked to lack of access to land and natural resources ... Several of the difficulties that pertained to indigenous groups could be framed within the context of the MDGs.”

The United Nations Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues (IASG) in a statement after a consultation in 2004 said that: “... as the 2005 review of the implementation of the MDGs nears, it appears from available evidence that indigenous and tribal peoples are lagging behind other parts of the population in the achievement of the goals in most, if not all, the countries in which they live, and indigenous and tribal women commonly face additional gender-based disadvantages and discrimination... Concern has also been expressed that the effort to meet the targets laid down for... MDGs could in fact have harmful effects for indigenous and tribal peoples, such as the acceleration of the loss of the lands and natural resources ...or the displacement from those lands.”

A concept note for a round-table discussion on Goal 1 (eradicating poverty and hunger) held during a recent meeting of the high-level segment at the United Nations Economic and Social Council noted that “even within successful countries, there are pockets where poverty and hunger are persistently high and which will not share the fruits of economic growth. Particular groups of people suffer higher overall incidence of poverty and hunger, including children, female-headed households, indigenous and tribal peoples and landless populations.” This was an important observation from the standpoint of indigenous peoples whose specific realities have been masked in the statistical averages that are usually

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[3] The IASG is composed of representatives of various United Nations bodies, agencies, programmes and funds. It was formed in 2002 initially to support the first session of the Permanent Forum and has since broadened its work to coordinate the UN’s activities with indigenous peoples.

[16] United Nations Economic and Social Council, High-Level Segment (16-17 March 2005): Concept note for Round-Table 1 on Eradication of Poverty and Hunger, copy on file with author.

presented on the MDGs. If these are not addressed, within a human rights framework, indigenous peoples could become the sacrificial lambs for the reduction of poverty through patterns of development that benefit the rest of society at immense cost to them.  

“Development aggression”

For indigenous peoples worldwide, the term ‘development’ has acquired a negative connotation even if it is termed ‘sustainable’, because their histories are replete with traumatic experiences with development projects, policies and programmes. In fact, indigenous peoples regard mainstream development as one of the root causes of their problems. If the MDGs set out to just reinforce this paradigm, and not challenge it, there is little hope that they can bring about positive changes for indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples use the term “development aggression” to describe dominant development.  

By this they mean the imposition of ‘development projects’ and policies under the rubric of modernization or nation building in which the views and consent of indigenous peoples directly affected have not been solicited. As a result, indigenous peoples have suffered destruction or loss of ancestral territories and resources, denigration of indigenous worldviews and values and of their political, economic and socio-cultural systems and institutions, ecosystem degradation, displacement, and violent conflict.

All these effects are usually associated with large-scale commercial extraction of minerals, oil and gas, trees and biodiversity, the construction of mega-hydroelectric dams, and highways, and chemical-intensive commercial mono-crop agriculture plantations, industrial forest plantations, among others. Global and national policies and programmes such as assimilation, structural adjustment packages, green revolution, agrarian reform, and neoliberal policies that favour the market and reduce the role of the state in providing basic services also have a disproportionately negative impact on indigenous peoples. Sectoral loans from international financial institutions such as education sector loans, primarily used to perpetuate the dominant development paradigm and the modernization agenda, are also considered development aggression.

Systemic changes and policy reforms are needed if the MDGs are to make a difference in the daily lives of indigenous peoples. A general

19 Making the MDGs Relevant to Indigenous Peoples: Statement by Victoria Tauli Corpuz (Member, United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues) presented at the round-table (see fn.3).

20 This concept was formulated in the Philippines by the indigenous peoples’ movement in the 1980s to describe their negative experiences with development. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples in his report of his official mission to the Philippines in December 2002, says, “Many communities resist being forced or pressured into development projects that destroy their traditional economy, community structures, and cultural values, a process aptly described as “development aggression.”
recommendation for all the goals is the creation of mechanisms and processes that will allow indigenous communities, institutions, and organizations to play key roles in enriching the debates, designing the path to achieve the goals, and creating and applying indicators to monitor progress that are more sensitive to indigenous peoples.

Given the largely negative experiences of indigenous peoples with nation-state building, and mainstream development, distinct movements have emerged to challenge these approaches. These have had an impact at national and international levels as evidenced by constitutional amendments, existing legal instruments and emerging ones concerning indigenous identity and rights. As a result of such advocacy, the thinking that indigenous peoples are vulnerable peoples who will benefit from protection and integration into the dominant society has significantly changed in many countries. There is more emphasis now on the right of indigenous peoples to preserve their cultural values and institutions and exercise more control over their own development.

Merely mitigating the adverse impact of development will not do justice to indigenous peoples, who did not seek such projects in the first place. There is gradual recognition of the need to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before policies affecting them are formulated or before projects are brought into their communities. Indigenous peoples themselves are formulating concepts and concrete proposals in relation to their development. These can be described as “self-development”, “ethno-development”, “development with identity”, “autonomous development” and “life projects”.

**Poverty and indigenous peoples**

Indigenous peoples live in 70 countries. Not many studies have been conducted on poverty among indigenous peoples. The little research shows that indigenous peoples are disproportionately represented among the poorest of the poor in both developed and developing countries. A World Bank study on indigenous peoples and poverty in Latin America concluded that “poverty among Latin America’s indigenous population is pervasive and severe” (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 1994). The study documented the socio-economic situation of around 34 million indigenous peoples, eight per cent of the region’s total population. One of its conclusions is that the poverty map in the region coincides with indigenous peoples’ territories.

A subsequent study in the region conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank came up with similar conclusions and observations.

By conventional socioeconomic indicators, whether based on income data or on concepts of unsatisfied basic needs, indigenous peoples as an ethnic group are represented disproportionately among both the poor and the extreme poor. Moreover, with very few exceptions, the indications are that this trend has
population of which 90 per cent are indigenous, almost all are living in extreme poverty.\textsuperscript{23} Eight out of every 10 indigenous children in this country live in poverty, according to indicators published in the 2001 UNDP Human Development Report.

An Asian Development Bank study in 2002 on the poverty situation of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in Viet Nam, the Philippines, Cambodia and Indonesia found that in Viet Nam (the only country among the four where disaggregated data was available), poverty is the worst among the ethnic minorities\textsuperscript{24} who live in the Highland areas of Northern and Central Viet Nam. The report concluded that there was no substantial improvement in the economic condition of indigenous peoples.

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\textsuperscript{24} While ‘ethnic minorities’ is still a term used in Viet Nam, China, Myanmar and other Asian and African countries, many of these peoples could fall within the UN working definition of indigenous peoples. **Self-identification** as indigenous is regarded as a fundamental element in his working definition: On an individual basis, an indigenous person is one who belongs to these indigenous peoples through self-identification as indigenous (group consciousness) and is recognized and accepted by the group as one of its members (acceptance by the group). Several ethnic minorities have self-identified as indigenous peoples.

Proponents of mainstream development regard indigenous peoples' economic livelihood systems such as owner-tiller small farm agriculture, swidden or shifting agriculture, hunting and gathering, and pastoralism as inefficient and backward, and believe that these peoples need to be integrated into the market economy and into dominant society. As a result, indigenous peoples have seen their ancestral lands converted into commercial mono-crop agriculture and forest plantations, mines, export processing zones or dumping sites for nuclear wastes. Cash crop production took place on a massive scale not only in Central America but also in Asia and Africa. The impact on indigenous peoples in Central America as described by the IADB study can be seen in other regions.

From an indigenous perspective, the situation appears to have been particularly serious in those countries where the development of cash crops for export (such as coffee) led to demands for indigenous labour as well as to pressure on their lands. In Guatemala and parts of Mexico, where the coffee economy grew particularly rapidly at this time, indigenous peoples lost much of their communal lands. Many became resident workers (colonos) on the coffee plantations; and in the Guatemalan highlands, where the indigenous population was now mainly concentrated, farm plots rapidly became too small to provide for a subsistence income. Regular periods of migrant labour to the large agricultural plantations became part of the Guatemalan Indian's life. Until the 1940s, coercive debt-bondage and vagrancy laws compelled indigenous peasants to provide seasonal estate labour; since that time, with most indigenous lands unable to provide a subsistence income, market forces have been enough to provide the migrant and seasonal labour in commercial agriculture.

Universal primary education

Education, for most indigenous peoples, is seen as a way to get out of poverty. However, the rate of illiteracy among indigenous peoples is usually higher than that of dominant groups. Even the number of indigenous children who complete primary education is much lower. ONIC revealed that a 1985 census in Colombia showed that there is a 44 per cent illiteracy rate among the country’s 64 indigenous ethno-linguistic groups, which is still higher than the 30.6 per cent of illiteracy among the rural population.25

A World Bank study has shown that illiteracy remains a problem for some states in Mexico with predominant indigenous populations. In 1980 illiteracy in Oaxaca was 46 per cent. This went down to 28 per cent in 1990 but was still more than twice the national average of 12 per cent. In Chiapas the illiteracy rate in 1990 was 30 per cent (Psacharopoulos

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25 ONIC (Organizacion Nacional Indigena de Colombia) is a national federation of indigenous peoples’ organizations in Colombia.

*Indigenous peoples and the Millennium Development Goals.* Victoria Tauli-Corpuz/Tebtebba
and Patrinos 1994). The study also did a survey on the effects of gender and ethnicity on educational attainment in Bolivia. One of the conclusions was “that indigenous individuals were 30 per cent more likely not to have completed primary school than their non-indigenous counterparts.”

A 1993 study on ethnic disparities in access to education in Guatemala found that Mayan students represented 25 per cent of all primary-level students, 10 per cent of secondary level students, and five per cent of university enrolment. This is despite the fact that Mayan peoples represent almost 60 per cent of the total population in Guatemala.

There is no question that universal primary education is desirable for indigenous peoples. However, the quality of education has to be looked into. Does universal primary education make indigenous children value further their indigenous cultures and norms or does it make them deny their identity or despise their own cultures and tradition? In most cases, indigenous children who enter school for the first time get traumatized because they do not understand the language used, they are teased and discriminated against because they speak a strange language or dialect, they are not dressed like the others, and they are badly treated by the teachers. This explains why there is a high-dropout rate in the first three grades.

Getting higher education is very difficult for many indigenous people mainly because they do not have the means to go to high school or college. But if they did succeed in finishing college or university, another set of problems crops up. The main complaint of indigenous elders is that when their children get educated in the modern school system they usually do not return to their ancestral lands. First of all, there is no possibility of their getting jobs related to the courses they took in their own communities. Secondly, the conveniences offered by the city cannot be found in their own communities, whether these are electricity, piped-water, telephones, or roads. In terms of pedagogical methods, is due consideration given to indigenous teaching and learning approaches?

Indigenous worldviews, perspectives and history are invisible from textbooks and school curricula. In fact, what is generally seen are discriminatory references to indigenous peoples. Bilingual intercultural education is a common demand by indigenous peoples in most countries. Unfortunately, governments, whether at the national or at the UN level, plead a lack of resources. In some countries in Latin America like Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia and Guatemala educational reforms are being undertaken which includes, among others, bilingual intercultural education.

The importance of bilingual education was further affirmed by the World Bank study cited above. In Mexico, “..only 1 per cent of first graders in indigenous areas will
successfully complete their sixth year of study. However, where a bilingual programme has been put into effect in the first grade, substantially lower rates of desertion and grade repetition have been observed (Modiano 1988).

At a consultation held between indigenous peoples of Asia in February 2005, the participants raised the issue of indigenous and tribal children not being able to attend schools. This is because of school buildings being occupied by military men or there are no teachers. This is common in communities where armed conflicts are still raging. Even in areas where there are no such conflicts, however, there are still many communities where there are no schools. Many indigenous peoples especially in the developing world live in the most inaccessible areas and, given their small populations, governments are disinclined to invest money to set up schools. With the increasing push to privatize education, the hope for indigenous peoples to be able to go to school becomes more remote.

Structural causes of poverty among indigenous peoples

The studies by the financial institutions agree that poverty and extreme poverty characterize many indigenous communities. This poverty finds its roots in colonization, the destruction of indigenous economic and socio-political systems, continuing systemic racism and discrimination, social exclusion, and denial of indigenous peoples’ individual and collective rights. In the 1950s, when the ILO Convention 107 on Indigenous and Tribal Populations emerged, the prevailing view was that indigenous peoples had to be assimilated or integrated in dominant society. Many nation-states adopted this approach. This is ironical as the pre-independence liberation movements, which indigenous peoples took part in, fought against colonialism which regarded the colonized as unfit to govern themselves. Yet when the nation-states came into being they perpetuated internal colonization.

Indigenous peoples felt an immense sense of betrayal when the autonomy and local sovereignty that their ancestors fought and died for was violated by the new rulers. Legal, political, economic and cultural systems in the European mould were put into place. These ignored or contradicted pre-existing social, political and cultural systems developed by indigenous peoples to govern themselves and their relations with nature and their neighbours. The new nation-states invoked doctrines and laws used by colonizers such as terra nullius or

26 *Terra nullius* means ‘lands unoccupied before European settlement’. The term was used in Australia by colonizers to justify their occupation of indigenous peoples’ territories. But it did not gain universal recognition as customary international law by several decisions (as by the International Court of Justice on the question of whether the Western Sahara was a territory belonging to no one at the time of colonization by Spain (1884) or the Mabo Case where the Australian High Court decided that the Mer (Murray Islands) belonged to the islanders and not the Queensland government).
the Regalian Doctrine\textsuperscript{27}, which disenfranchised indigenous peoples of their ancestral territories. Indigenous socio-cultural and political systems seen as barriers to the entrenchment of colonial rule or perpetuation of state hegemony were illegalized or destroyed. These factors led indigenous peoples to continue their ancestors' struggles to maintain their pre-colonial self-determining status as peoples and nations.

Structural inequities and inequalities were further reinforced by the legislation of discriminatory and oppressive land laws that ignored indigenous peoples' customary land tenure systems and laws. Natural resource management laws of governments contradicted indigenous sustainable natural resource management practices. Pervasive paternalism, development aggression and sheer government neglect in providing social services to indigenous peoples all contribute to the root causes of chronic poverty among indigenous peoples. Indigenous territories were basically regarded as resource-base areas, with the nation-state retaining the sole prerogative to decide how and through whom it will exploit these resources.

The debt burden, undoubtedly, is a major factor for the exacerbation of indigenous peoples’ poverty. To be able to generate foreign exchange to pay for foreign debt, what most governments do is extract their natural resources for export even if this is clearly unsustainable. In many countries, the last remaining natural resources to be extracted are found in indigenous peoples’ territories. This is because many indigenous peoples have protected their territories from being plundered by colonizers and even by post-colonial governments. Unfortunately, this well-preserved natural wealth is regarded as a source of foreign exchange to service the debts incurred by the governments.

Bringing in the extractive industry sector, particularly those involved in mineral, oil and gas extraction to indigenous territories, is regarded as one way of generating money to pay back debt. The situation in Ecuador as described below is a classic illustration of the links between the debt problem, extractive industries and indigenous poverty.

Despite the knowledge of contamination in the Oriente, the Ecuadorian government has continuously advocated the mining of petroleum in the Oriente with absolute disregard to the interests of the indigenous peoples. There is a prevailing hope that oil production will help stabilize the economy and eventually be a key component in the reduction of the national debt.

\textsuperscript{27} The Regalian Doctrine proceeds from the premise that all natural resources in the country’s territory belong to the state in \textit{imperium} and \textit{dominium}. This legal fiction dates back to the arrival of Spaniards in the Philippines when they declared all lands in the country as belonging to the King of Spain. Since then, the Government has taken this as the foremost principle underlying its laws and programmes on natural resources.
Notwithstanding the fact that the national debt has risen from two hundred million dollars in 1970 to over sixteen billion in 1998, the Ecuadorian government continuously favours the interests of foreign companies over its own indigenous citizens. This dependence on foreign investors leaves Ecuador’s economy vulnerable to the fluctuating prices of oil, which is responsible for forty per cent of the national income yearly. With such a large portion of their economy based upon such a fluctuating industry, the results have been fairly disastrous for the people and the poverty rate in Ecuador. The poverty rate, which was at an overwhelming level of fifty per cent in 1975, reached the appalling rate of sixty-five per cent in 1992 ... Without a set of well-monitored regulations concerning the extraction of oil in the Oriente, Ecuador is leaving itself open to the possibility of continued environmental destruction and human rights violations.

If there are not much natural resources left, as in the case of the Philippines, then the government’s option is to export labour even if labour conditions abroad are oppressive to the extent of bordering on slavery. Indigenous women also joint join the global labour market in significant numbers. For example, at least ten per cent of the 88,000 Filipino overseas contract workers in Hong Kong are from the Cordillera region, most of whom are indigenous women. Foreign remittances from these workers contribute substantially to foreign exchange receipts.

Structural adjustment packages, with conditionalities tied to the acquisition of additional foreign loans, made basic social services even more inaccessible for indigenous peoples. A government that spends most of its budget to service its local and foreign debt will always have a greatly diminished budget for social services. If even the majority urban populations cannot be provided basic services, the possibilities are much smaller for indigenous peoples in remote areas. National politicians rarely give them any priority as their numbers are negligible for election purposes.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) is one response of the international community to the debt problem. While it is claimed that PRSPs are nationally-owned processes, indigenous peoples in most parts of the world can attest that they have never been involved in drawing up these nor were their concerns reflected in any satisfactory way. The PRSPs, in fact, are seen by some indigenous peoples and civil society organizations as recycled structural adjustment packages.

The first of the MDGs seeks to “halve the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and those who suffer from hunger” by the year 2015. The path taken by a country to achieve this goal will determine the

extent to which poverty among indigenous peoples will be alleviated. By incurring more debts, engaging in more aggressive extraction of mineral resources, oil, or gas in indigenous peoples’ territories, or further liberalizing imports to the detriment of traditional livelihoods, governments cannot in all probability, reduce poverty among indigenous peoples. Small-scale projects by intergovernmental development agencies like UNDP or the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) can provide safety nets for indigenous peoples.

However, there needs to be a serious evaluation of development projects undertaken by international agencies. Some key issues are whether these projects are planned, implemented and evaluated with indigenous peoples, whether they are reinforcing or destroying sustainable resource management systems of indigenous peoples, and whether they are supporting their traditional systems of reciprocity and collective decision making.

A more sustainable approach is to squarely deal with structural causes of poverty, one of which is the debt trap, by introducing policy and structural reforms not only at the country level but at the global level as well. There is a lot to learn from the experiences of the international and regional financial institutions that required debtor countries to create indigenous peoples’ development plans before loans for projects in indigenous peoples’ territories are released. How were these plans formulated? What are the lessons learned in terms of designing, planning and implementing them?

**Poverty and poverty indicators seen from an indigenous lens**

The Inter-American Development Bank has identified some of the main challenges for indigenous peoples and sustainable development in a policy document it released in 1997.

“... A major challenge is to deepen the understanding of poverty in indigenous communities, developing culturally sensitive poverty indicators that can define poverty in terms of unsatisfied basic needs, taking into consideration the nature of traditional subsistence economies. These economies are characterized by low levels of cash income. Basic needs are largely satisfied through non-market mechanisms for the redistribution of goods. It will be crucial to take into account indigenous views and aspirations regarding poverty and development. The latter is particularly important because poverty may also be seen as a relative concept rather than an absolute one to the extent that it includes not only the material conditions but also the aspirations of the peoples involved.”

Indigenous peoples have expressed persistent concerns over how poverty is defined and monitored. Poverty is generally defined in terms of income and consumption and constructed around cash incomes and food expenditures within a market and cash-based economic setting. These parameters cannot capture or adequately reflect the realities of many indigenous peoples.
There is little recognition of non-income indicators of poverty such as the lack of voice or power in political and bureaucratic systems, non-recognition of the collective rights of indigenous peoples and their lack of access to basic infrastructure and social services. While there is an increasing number of indigenous peoples engaged with the market economy the majority are still mainly engaged in subsistence production. Thus, the dollar a day indicator does not make much sense for people who do not sell their labour or who do not spend the bigger part of their time to produce for the market.

It may be more relevant to develop strategies for wealth reduction based on a definition of a “greed line”. Furthermore, alleviating the poverty of the rest of the population may mean greater poverty for indigenous peoples. Above all, poverty is a collective phenomenon with historical and structural causes and cannot be dealt with only on an individual level. Poverty should be addressed through a rights-based approach and in particular through the recognition of collective human rights.

The need for data disaggregation to better understand the situation of indigenous peoples cannot be overemphasized. The UNDP Human Development Report (HDR) from 1994 to 1998 stressed that it is important to disaggregate the human development indicators on the basis of factors such as gender, race and ethnicity, and geography to portray more accurately and act appropriately in response to such indicators. If the situation of indigenous peoples is accurately reflected in the HDR, the ranking of countries with indigenous peoples in the Human Development Index (HDI) goes down. In the 1996 HDR for example, Mexico ranked 48th among 120 countries. If its indigenous populations are excluded from the results, it will improve its rank to 28. Bolivia and Guatemala, countries with indigenous peoples composing 50 per cent or more of the total population, are found in the lowest ranks, Bolivia (111), Guatemala (112). Peru, which has a big percentage of indigenous peoples, has a rank of 91. The 2004 UNDP Human Development Report concluded that indigenous peoples are more likely to be poor than non-indigenous peoples and that public spending in basic social services “systematically discriminates against minorities and indigenous peoples” (UNDP 2004).

Data disaggregation was one of the recommendations to emerge from the first and second sessions of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. A workshop on the issue said that: “Indigenous peoples should fully participate as equal partners, in all stages of data collection, including planning, implementing, analyzing and dissemination, access and return, with appropriate resources and capacity building to do so. Data collection must respond to the

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priorities and aims of the indigenous communities themselves. Participation of indigenous communities in the conceptualization, implementation, reporting, analysis and dissemination of data collected is crucial, both at the country and international levels. Indigenous peoples should be trained and employed by data collecting institutions at national and international levels. The process of data collection is critical for the empowerment of the communities and for identifying their needs." \(^{30}\)

**Conflict of paradigms**

If economic growth means undertaking economic programmes which result in the further impoverishment of indigenous peoples and the disappearance of their knowledge and cultures, there is a need for serious rethinking. The conflict over different paradigms of development then becomes the central question.

The key weakness of the MDGs is that it does not question the mainstream development paradigm nor does it address the economic, political, social and cultural structural causes of poverty. Peggy Antrobus, a leading feminist, says that “a major problem of the MDGs is their abstraction from the social, political and economic context in which they are to be implemented – the ‘political economy’ of the MDGs.” \(^{31}\)

In countries with rising rates of economic growth, the situation of indigenous peoples has not necessarily changed for the better. In fact, in many countries where economic growth has been spurred by massive extraction of natural resources such as minerals, oil, gas, trees, aquatic resources, and building giant infrastructure like hydroelectric dams, indigenous peoples have become more impoverished. Since the 1950s, indigenous peoples have been losing their cultures and their lands to these so-called development projects. Many have not been resettled and those who were, have been placed in hostile or infertile lands. It is a common observation that indigenous peoples live in territories richly endowed with natural resources but they remain the poorest of the poor. Chiapas, in Mexico, is an example. It is the main producer of gas and oil, yet most indigenous women cut firewood for cooking. Around 11 million people in Mexico live in extreme poverty and the great majority of them are indigenous peoples. A study on the poverty of indigenous peoples in Nicaragua represents a typical situation.

As a region the Atlantic Coast is exceptionally rich in terms of natural resources. The coasts are teeming

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\(^{31}\) Paper presented by Peggy Antrobus at the Working Group on MDGs and Gender Equity during the Caribbean Regional Conference on the Millennium Development Goals, organized by UNDP (July 2003).
with fish, shrimp and lobster; the forests in the RAAN have extensive stands of pine and, to a lesser extent, mahogany and other hardwoods; and there are extensive deposits of minerals (gold, silver, copper and lead), especially along the headwaters of the rivers in the RAAN (Radley 1960). Historically, however, extraction of these resources has been capitalized and directed by interests based outside the region, most of whom have had little interest in the long-term development of the Atlantic Coast. The indigenous peoples of the region have consequently had little opportunity to share in the commercial exploitation of this wealth, and gained little in terms of the development of a rationally planned and maintained infrastructure.\(^{32}\)

In an era of globalization where trade and investment liberalization, deregulation and privatization are the policies followed by most governments, the face of poverty for many indigenous peoples has changed for the worst. For example, dumping of cheap imported vegetables, through agricultural liberalization, has greatly affected indigenous vegetable farmers in the Philippines. Imported vegetables, which came in legally or through the back door, were priced 30 to 50 per cent lower than the local produce. As a result, at least 250,000 farmers and 400 vegetable traders lost their livelihoods.\(^{32}\) Because of this crisis, which seems to have no end in sight, more farmers are shifting to the lucrative production of marijuana even if it is illegal. The production of marijuana, coca, and opium are now alternative sources of livelihood for some indigenous peoples in countries like the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Colombia and Venezuela, which have seen destruction of subsistence production systems by cash cropping or extractive industries, volatility of commodity prices and the dumping of cheap, highly subsidized agricultural products.

The example of coffee production demonstrates clearly the problems of indigenous peoples with the mainstream development model and also with the globalization of the market economy. Coffee production for export has been taking place in indigenous communities in Guatemala since the late 19th century. Seasonal migration of indigenous peoples to work in coffee farms has been one of their survival strategies. There are those who opted to permanently migrate, like the Q’eqchi and the Poqomchi who provided much of the permanent labour on the large coffee farms at the Alta Verapaz department. Export


\(^{33}\) “Impact of Trade Liberalization on the Rural Poor: Philippine Case Study”, prepared by Tebtebba for IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) by Victoria Tauli Corpuz and Ruth Batani-Sidchogan (unpublished). The findings were presented at the 27th IFAD Board of Governors Meeting in Rome on 18 February 2004.
of agricultural products was the main economic path taken by Mexico. Profits rest on the exploitation of cheap labour of indigenous peoples who live in bunkhouses, without privacy, and could not even enjoy basic needs as clean water and toilets (Plant 1998a).

When Viet Nam opened up its economy to the world market it built irrigation canals and provided subsidies for farmers to migrate to the Central Highlands and other upland areas in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1990 Viet Nam’s coffee production was only 1.5 million bags. This increased to a phenomenal 15 million bags in 2000, making Viet Nam the second largest coffee producer in the world. Large tracts of land, including well-preserved forests, in the territories of the indigenous peoples (who are called ethnic minorities by the government) were converted to coffee plantations and sold to rich lowlanders based in Saigon. Massive deforestation and environmental devastation resulted from this project. The indigenous peoples of Viet Nam were displaced from their lands by tens of thousands of lowlanders who migrated to their communities to engage in coffee production

The overproduction of coffee worldwide brought prices tumbling down. Among those who suffered the most are indigenous peoples, not only from Viet Nam, but also from various parts of the world. Coffee prices dropped from $1500 per tonne in 1998 to less than $700 per tonne in 2000, largely due to the flooding of Vietnamese coffee onto the world market. This has made it less economical to grow the ‘black gold’ and has slowed the immigration somewhat, yet the problem of land tenure remains. In Mexico, coffee cultivation has been an important source of income for indigenous communities in Chiapas and Oaxaca. Nationwide, over 70 per cent of coffee farmers have plots of less than two hectares. And in Chiapas, Mexico’s most important state for coffee production, 91 per cent of producers have less than five hectares. These coffee farmers now find themselves in extreme poverty. The World Bank says that in Central America 400,000 temporary coffee workers and 200,000 permanent workers lost their jobs following the collapse of the coffee prices.

Viet Nam is one of the few countries that are on track as far as achieving the MDGs. Clearly, any progress has been made at the expense of the indigenous peoples in that country. According to one recent study,

“Although the opening of Viet Nam’s economy to market forces in the 1980s and 1990s has reduced poverty levels and increased personal freedoms for much of the population, minorities continue to face many hardships … Most upland ethnic minorities have little benefited from these changes. They suffer from disease, lack clean water, and have low literacy rates and low

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34 Agence France Press, 2000
incomes, despite many government efforts at upland development."^{36}

This picture is not unique to Viet Nam alone. The grazing lands of pastoralist Maasai peoples in Kenya and Tanzania, for instance, are now occupied by settler farmers and converted to agricultural lands.\(^{37}\) The destruction of the pastoralist economy around which their identities and cultures as indigenous peoples revolve is taking place with full complicity of the State and the market.

The issue of poverty reduction and economic development cannot be addressed separately from the issues of indigenous identity and worldviews, cultures and indigenous peoples’ rights to territories and resources and to self-determination. There is tension, no doubt, between maintaining indigenous identity on one hand and improving economic conditions on the other. In a world where improving economic conditions means the growth of market institutions, many indigenous peoples find themselves in a dilemma. If they participate fully in the market they have to forget about their customary land tenure systems, their traditional practices of redistributing wealth and ensuring more equitable access to and sharing of resources, and their natural resource management systems.

**Free, prior and informed consent**

It is in this context that it is crucial to obtain the free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) of indigenous peoples before development projects or any policies affecting them are designed and brought to their communities. This is nothing but respect for the right to participate in decision-making. Indigenous participants in the first session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues called for debates on how this principle is being developed, promoted and respected by governments, intergovernmental bodies and the private sector. On the basis of the recommendation from the third session of the Permanent Forum, the Economic and Social Council authorized a technical three-day workshop on free, prior and informed consent, which took place at the United Nations in January 2005.\(^{38}\)

A paper by Antoanella-Iulia Motoc of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) and Tebtebba Foundation, presented at


\(^{37}\) Discussion with Naomi Kipuri, a Maasai anthropologist and member of the African Working Group on Indigenous Populations and Communities of the African Commission on Peoples’ and Human Rights of the African Union. This is one of the findings of the working group’s report on the situation of indigenous populations in Africa in November 2003.

this workshop and also at the July 2004 session of WGIP, highlighted that:

Substantively, the principle of free, prior and informed consent recognizes indigenous peoples' inherent and prior rights to their lands and resources and respects their legitimate authority to require that third parties enter into an equal and respectful relationship with them based on the principle of informed consent. Procedurally, free, prior and informed consent requires processes that allow and support meaningful choices by indigenous peoples about their development path. The paper reviewed the treatment of FPIC in existing domestic and international instruments and discussed observations made by treaty bodies on the responses of governments. It is critical to highlight that the international community is now taking steps to provide a legal commentary on the principle. Treaty bodies are reviewing the impact of projects implemented in indigenous peoples' communities without application of FPIC principles, and recommending ways in which FPIC can be used.

The Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act\(^\text{41}\) of the Philippines defines free and prior informed consent to “mean the consensus of all members of the ICCs/IPs to be determined in accordance with their respective customary laws and practices, free from any external manipulation, interference, coercion, and obtained after fully disclosing the intent and

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40 Ibid.p.3.

The act underscores the right of indigenous peoples to accept or reject a certain development, activity or undertaking in their community. Much remains to be done to have it implemented.

Recognizing and implementing FPIC is a challenge for governments and corporations. A key recommendation from forum’s January 2005 workshop on free prior, informed consent was the drafting of a guidebook on how the principle should be implemented.

**Recommendations**

Indigenous peoples have presented recommendations in a number of areas as follows:

- **Adopt a human rights framework:**
  - The adoption of the human rights-based framework and approach to poverty reduction strategies begins with an indigenous perspective of poverty and wealth. The recognition of indigenous peoples’ claims for individual and collective rights, as distinct peoples, is crucial for a just and sustainable solution to widespread poverty in their midst.
  - Strategic issues such as agrarian land reform, land rights and reform of the judicial system should be addressed in national poverty reduction strategies, with indigenous peoples’ full and direct input.

- **Further, indigenous peoples must be enabled to fully participate in national and international gatherings where issues directly affecting them are being discussed** - including environmental agreements and global trade negotiations.
- **Staff in donor agencies and non-governmental organizations should be provided systematic training on indigenous peoples’ rights.**
- **Governments should contribute to the ongoing process of discussing and defining indigenous rights in forums such as the Organization of American States and United Nations High Commission for Human Rights and ratify and adequately implement existing instruments for the recognition of indigenous peoples’ rights** – for example, ILO Convention 169.
- **Promote research and data collection disaggregation**
- **All countries should collect disaggregated data based on ethnicity and indigenous peoples’ indicators of poverty, and the UNDP and World Bank should include disaggregated data on indigenous men and women’s poverty situation in their regular human development and poverty reports. This has been a standing recommendation by indigenous peoples in all sessions of the Permanent Forum.**

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Indigenous peoples’ representatives must be involved in designing, identifying variables, indicators, and choosing the questions to be asked, as well as in gathering and analysing data. Some essential questions could be:

- How do conditions of living vary among and within indigenous peoples, and within and between countries?
- Why are such variations present?
- What are current and long-term trends?
- What are potential causal factors of inequities?
- What is the effectiveness of policies and interventions?

All relevant United Nations bodies should implement the Permanent Forum’s recommendation to develop methodologies and strategies to research the underlying causes of “feminization” and “indigenization” of poverty, develop programmes that effectively address these underlying causes, and undertake systematic needs assessments of indigenous women to involve them in decision-making throughout the programme cycle.

Indigenous peoples’ own institutions should be supported so that they have sufficient funding and capacity to provide contextualized empirical data and monitor their poverty situation and to ensure they contribute to their own development proposals;

Several pilot countries should be selected to explore opportunities and risks for indigenous peoples in relation to the PRSP process.

Indigenous peoples should be made visible in national MDG reports in countries where they are found, the Secretary-General’s report on the five-year review of the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs, and reports of intergovernmental bodies. A preliminary review of 20 national MDG reports by the secretariat of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and found that 68 per cent do not integrate nor respond to the situation and concerns of indigenous and tribal peoples.

Adapt school education to reflect indigenous peoples’ needs and perspectives:

- Indigenous peoples’ education (formal or non-formal) must be based on indigenous peoples’ worldviews.
- Bilingual education should be introduced for the first three grades of primary school, at a minimum.
- Education materials must be purged of discriminatory contents and erroneous historical accounts, which make indigenous peoples’
invisible and misrepresents them should be rectified.
. Curriculum development should reflect local contexts of indigenous peoples. It must be a tool that prepares them and gives them the choice to either enter the formal system and/or function effectively in their own communities. There should be opportunities for indigenous elders to teach at elementary or secondary levels.
. Curricula for primary and secondary schools should include indigenous knowledge systems and reflect indigenous values. Indigenous pedagogies informed by stories, values, practices and ways of knowing indigenous peoples should be developed and integrated into education programmes.
. Indigenous peoples’ education must provide alternative learning paths, which respect and utilize indigenous learning systems that meet basic needs, such as identity, resource control and self-determination.
. Mobile schools should be set up for nomadic indigenous peoples and pastoralists.
. Resources should be made available to indigenous peoples to set up their own education systems, including schools, should they choose to do so. Traditional education systems should be supported.

Conclusions
This paper is aimed at sparking debate and encouraging the development of future projects. We hope will also spur governments, intergovernmental bodies and NGOs to ensure that their strategies to achieve the MDGs are sensitive to indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples are already defining their own visions and solutions of development referred to as “autonomous development”, “development with identity”, “life-projects”, etc. Governments, intergovernmental bodies, NGOs and the private sector should ensure that they do not contribute in undermining these efforts. In fact, they must hold dialogues with indigenous peoples on how they can reinforce these initiatives and link them with the MDGs. In particular, they must respect the principle of free, prior and informed consent and ensure its implementation is acceptable to communities affected.

The involvement of indigenous peoples in generating data through participatory processes can strengthen their capacity to evaluate their assets and problems, and design their own solutions. The improvement of data collection systems and development of research instruments and assessment tools constitute important foundational steps for building a body of scientific knowledge that is comprehensive, methodologically sound, and responsive to social needs, especially of the most marginalized and impoverished.
In conclusion, it is important to bear in mind that the Second Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples (2005-2015) coincides with the remaining timetable for the MDGs.

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz is Executive Director of Tebtebba Foundation, an indigenous peoples’ international centre for policy research, advocacy and education based in the Philippines. She is a member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and convener of the Asian Indigenous Network.

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