

Protect indigenous people's land rights and the whole world will benefit, UN forum declares

Protecting the land and resource rights of indigenous peoples will not only provide security for historically exploited groups but also help the global fight against climate change and biodiversity loss, said speakers on Monday at the annual [United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#).

In her opening remarks to the Forum in New York, the chairperson, Mariam Wallet Aboubakrine, a medical doctor from Timbuktu, Mali, called the land husbandry of Aboriginal peoples “part of our history and heritage.”

But few countries have acted to defend these peoples' collective rights, she added.

“Law enforcement is inadequate or non-existent, and other elements of Legislation goes against these rights,” she said. Measures necessary to give meaning to land rights, such as tenure delimitation and allocating title deeds, are often not implemented.

Moreover, she continued, those who defend indigenous rights continue to be targeted when they raise their voices – particularly when States or private actors seek their resources for aggressive development such as logging.

“As long as our rights over our lands, territories and resources are not recognized,” she added, indigenous people risk falling far short of the UN's [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

“In the same way,” she said, “the world risks losing the fight against climate change and the destruction of the environment.”



UN Photo/Evan Schneider

Participants of the seventeenth session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

UN for all peoples

General Assembly President Miroslav Lajčák reminded everyone “The United Nations is [here for people](#). And that includes indigenous people.”

“But we cannot yet say that this Organization has opened its doors wide enough,” he said. “And so, we need to be more ambitious.”

Mr. Lajčák, of Slovakia painted a grim picture of the situation facing indigenous people today, pointing out that while they make up only five per cent of the world’s population, they comprise 15 per cent of the world’s poorest people.

“That is shocking,” he said, adding that their human rights are being violated, they are being excluded and marginalized and face violence for asserting their basic rights.

Focusing on the theme of indigenous land, territories and resources, he said: “Indigenous people are being dispossessed. They are losing the lands their ancestors called home.”

But with global attention to indigenous rights on the rise, Mr. Lajčák saw reasons for hope, as well.

“The signs do look positive,” he said, noting that the UN teams on the ground are developing stronger partnerships, determined to make these communities stronger.

“We should be hopeful. But we cannot ignore the very real, and very serious, challenges. They cast a shadow over the future of many indigenous communities. And they demand our urgent attention,” he said.

When Evo Morales Ayma, President of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, spoke, he explained how for 500 years the indigenous people of America have waged a resistance campaign to defend their dignity and identity.

“We are all descendants of Mother Earth, so we are all brothers and sisters,” he underscored.

The annual Forum, the seventeenth, opened to a ceremonial cultural performance and a traditional welcome by Todadaho Sid Hill, Chief of the Onondaga Nation, located in New York.

Established in 2000, the forum provides expert advice and recommendations on indigenous issues to the UN’s Economic and Social Council as well as to specialized agencies that work on issues like development, agriculture, environmental protection and human rights.