

# United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

## A Resource Guide for Participants



## **I. Background of the UNPFII**

- A. Origins
- B. Mandate
- C. Membership
- D. The Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (SPFII)

## **II. How the UNPFII Works**

- A. The Annual Session
  - 1. Pre-sessional Meeting
  - 2. Duration and Location
  - 3. Participants
  - 4. Agenda, Theme, and Programme of Work
  - 5. Documents
  - 6. Plenary Sessions and Meetings
    - a. Speakers
    - b. Indigenous Caucuses
    - c. Specific Meetings
    - d. Cultural and Other Special Events
  - 7. Recommendations
- B. The Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues
- C. Expert Workshops
- D. Voluntary Fund on Indigenous Issues (in support of the UNPFII and the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People)
- E. Other Permanent Forum-related Matters
  - 1. The Portfolio System
  - 2. Meetings to further the mandate of the UNPFII
  - 3. Issues of concern, privileges and immunities

## **III. Practical Information for Indigenous and civil society participants**

- A. Logistics for the Annual Session
  - 1. Passport and Visa
  - 2. Travel
  - 3. Accommodation
  - 4. Security and Grounds Passes
  - 5. Medical Clearance/Insurance
  - 6. Local Information

# I. Background of the UNPFII

## A. Origins

The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) is a culmination of decades of work to raise the profile of indigenous issues within the international community. One of the first attempts by indigenous leaders to engage the international community was when Chief Deskaheh approached the League of Nations to make the voice of indigenous peoples heard and to defend the right of his people to live under their own laws, on the own land and under their own faith. A concept of indigenous rights further crystallized in 1957 in the first international legal instrument related to indigenous peoples' protection, ILO Convention 107 Concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries. This ILO convention was updated in 1989 by the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169.

The groundbreaking study of UN Special Rapporteur Jose Martinez Cobo in the 1970s and early 1980s provided substantive information on the state of the world's indigenous peoples and issued a clarion call to the United Nations to act decisively on their behalf. Subsequently, a Working Group on Indigenous Populations was formed in 1982 and tasked with developing international standards on indigenous rights, the result of which was the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. While this document has yet to be

adopted, it nevertheless established a benchmark to which states are urged to adhere.

In 1993, which was proclaimed by the UN as the "International Year of the World's Indigenous People," calls were first heard for a permanent forum to be established that could address indigenous-concerns. Nearly ten years later, this dream was realized with the inaugural session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in May 2002, marking a new era in which indigenous-nominated experts sit at a level of parity with government-nominated experts to speak for themselves as full-fledged members of a United Nations body.

## B. Mandate

The Permanent Forum was established by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution 2000/22 on 28 July 2000. In this resolution the UNPFII was given a mandate to "discuss indigenous issues within the mandate of the Council relating to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights." To substantiate this work, the Permanent Forum was called upon to provide expert advice and recommendations on indigenous issues to the UN system through the Council; raise awareness and promote the integration and coordination of relevant activities within the UN system; and prepare and disseminate information on indigenous issues.

### **C. Membership**

The Permanent Forum is comprised of sixteen independent experts, functioning in their personal capacity, who serve for a term of three years as Members and may be re-elected or re-appointed for one additional term. Eight of the Members are nominated by governments and eight are nominated directly by indigenous organizations in their regions.

The Members nominated by governments are elected by ECOSOC based on the five regional groupings of States normally used at the United Nations (Africa; Asia; Eastern Europe; Latin America and the Caribbean; and Western Europe and Other States).

The Members nominated by indigenous organizations are appointed by the President of ECOSOC and represent the seven socio-cultural regions determined to give broad representation to the world's indigenous peoples. The regions are Africa; Asia; Central and South America and the Caribbean; the Arctic; Eastern Europe, Russian Federation, Central Asia and Transcaucasia; North America; and the Pacific.

Serving the UNPFII in their capacity as independent experts, Members are not remunerated for their activities done on behalf of the Forum. Members perform their work under the legal status of "UN experts on mission" and are accorded the functional privileges and immunities that are specified in the 1946 Convention on Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations.

### **D. The Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (SPFII)**

The Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was established by the General Assembly in 2002. Based at UN Headquarters in New York in the Division for Social Policy and Development of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DSPD/DESA), SPFII works year-round to:

- prepare for annual sessions of the Permanent Forum. The secretariat also provides support to the Members of the UNPFII throughout the year;
- advocate for, facilitate and promote the coordination of implementation within the UN system of the recommendations that emerge from each annual session and promote awareness of indigenous issues within the UN system, governments, and the broad public; and
- serve as a source of information and a coordination point for advocacy efforts that relate to the Permanent Forum's mandate and the ongoing issues that arise concerning indigenous peoples.

In preparation for the Permanent Forum's annual sessions, SPFII solicits and prepares documentation, manages pre-registration of attendees, arranges logistics for the meeting, coordinates the multitude of special events during the session (some 60 such events taking place), and provides information

notes on conference details (travel, accommodations, etc.) for the indigenous and non-governmental organizations that will attend, as well as facilitating the logistics for Members themselves. SPFII also collects and disseminates reports from UN agencies on implementation of the Permanent Forum's recommendations that are studied and used by Members as an important part of their dialogue with the UN system and member states. SPFII also prepares its report to the Permanent Forum—generally in March of each year—that discusses developments in the mandated areas and ongoing priorities/themes of the Permanent Forum; and helps to inform the work of the annual session.

Throughout the year, SPFII provides logistical support to UNPFII Members as they carry out their Forum-related work, including travel, coordination for events, and preparation of background notes and draft statements. Additionally SPFII facilitates the flow of information, both among Members, and between the Permanent Forum and the general public. Specifically, this flow is managed by fielding public queries, maintaining a website and issuing a [quarterly newsletter](#) and other informational materials for circulation.

Within the UN system, SPFII takes advantage of its permanent presence at the New York Headquarters to advocate for implementation of the Permanent Forum's recommendations during the year. SPFII also advocates for indigenous issues through its substantive support and participation in the UN Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues (see following section) as well as through convening the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) Intra-

Departmental Task Force of the UN Secretariat and participating in the United Nations Development Group and its relevant task forces. SPFII staff members maintain an active circuit during the year of attendance at relevant indigenous issues meetings and workshops, usually in concert with Members of the Permanent forum. SPFII actively promotes the integration of indigenous issues in the UN system by participating in a variety of inter-agency mechanisms, including the UN Development Group (UNDG), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the Inter Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANGWE) and other bodies.

SPFII also provides substantive support for the Trust Fund on Indigenous Issues and cooperates in implementing select pilot projects.

## **II. How the UNPFII Works**

### **A. The Annual Session**

#### **1. Pre-session Meeting**

Prior to the start of the annual session, Members of the Permanent Forum occasionally convene in a pre-session meeting. During the pre-session meeting, Members exchange information on important developments, receive briefings from SPFII on relevant developments since the previous annual session including preparations for the upcoming Permanent Forum session. When new Members join the Permanent

Forum, an overview is given of standard UN operating procedures and logistics, and topics, such as the Member portfolio system, the formulation of the recommendations process, the time frame of work, and engagement with other UN actors. Since the Permanent Forum's inception two formal and two informal pre-session meetings have been held, as of April 2006.

## **2. Duration and Location**

As per ECOSOC Resolution 2000/22, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues meets for ten working days each year, generally in the month of May. According to the resolution, this annual session may be held at UN Headquarters in New York or Geneva, or at an alternate location chosen by the Forum. To date, annual sessions of the Permanent Forum have been held in New York.

## **3. Participants**

During the annual session each year a number of key UN and other intergovernmental organization representatives, as well as hundreds of participants hailing from indigenous communities and non-governmental organizations around the world join the sixteen Members of the Permanent Forum for an interactive dialogue. Some 1200 people participate annually, including about 1,000 indigenous participants, civil society organizations, seventy states and more than thirty intergovernmental entities.

## **4. Agenda, Theme, and Programme of Work**

During each annual session of the Permanent Forum, the theme for the subsequent year's session is determined. The draft programme of work for the annual session is prepared each year by SPFII in consultation with the Bureau of the Permanent Forum, about two months in advance of the session start date and is publicly available one month prior to the session. In the opening meeting of the session, high-level personalities address the Permanent Forum, such as the Secretary-General or the Deputy Secretary General, the President of the General Assembly and ECOSOC, as well as the Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs. At the opening meeting of each session the Permanent Forum elects a Chairperson, four Vice-Chairpersons and a Rapporteur. It also adopts the agenda and program of work. The Rules of Procedure of the Permanent Forum are the same as the Rules of Procedure of ECOSOC. These Rules of Procedure may be requested from the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum. In accordance with ECOSOC resolution 2000/22 that established the Permanent Forum, the Permanent Forum must adopt its recommendations by consensus.

## **5. Documents**

Upon arrival at the annual session of the Permanent Forum indigenous peoples and other civil society participants will be able to receive official documentation submitted to the Permanent Forum from the Conference Officers. This documentation, including the Note of the Secretariat, the Program of Work, information/reports received from the UN system, governments, and NGOs in consultative status with

ECOSOC, is also posted on the Permanent Forum website six to eight weeks in advance of the session.

All these bodies provide annual updates on the implementation of past recommendations of the Permanent Forum and information on their overall activities that may help to inform recommendations of the Permanent Forum in the current session. Members of the Permanent Forum examine these reports with special focus on those reports.

## **6. Plenary Sessions and Meetings**

### **a. Speakers**

A diverse array of speakers are invited to address the Forum each year. High-level and other representatives from UN bodies, representatives of Member States, indigenous representatives and other non-governmental organizations in consultative status with ECOSOC who register to attend the forum as observers deliver statements to the Forum.

Speaker lists for representatives of indigenous peoples' organizations, group statements and indigenous caucuses are arranged and finalized by SPFII during the session. Members of the Permanent Forum introduce items, ask questions and make statements whenever they judge appropriate. Time constraints are considerable given the great number of observers who ask for the floor. The Chairperson explains the procedure to follow at the beginning of each plenary session regarding the list of speakers and also sets time limits for interventions (5 to 7 minutes is the practice).

### **b. Indigenous Caucuses**

Indigenous caucuses are a vibrant element of the annual session of the Permanent Forum, and they allow for consolidated advocacy and cooperation to take place across regions and groupings. In addition to the global indigenous caucus, indigenous caucuses have generally been organized along regional lines, as well as some thematic groups. An indigenous women's caucus and an indigenous youth caucus have also been organized. Where possible, rooms are made available for caucuses to gather in extra-session meetings. Caucus statements are developed and delivered and feed directly into the Members' preparation of the Permanent Forum's recommendations. The global indigenous caucus also meets during the weekend at a specified location in New York prior to the annual session of the Permanent Forum. In the past indigenous caucuses have made collective statements and submitted recommendations for the consideration of Members of the Permanent Forum

### **c. Specific Meetings**

During the annual session, a number of specific meetings take place outside the plenary meetings of the Permanent Forum that help to inform the work of developing recommendations and advancing indigenous issues.

Friends of the Forum (a group of representatives from 17 Member States who support the work of the Permanent Forum) interact with other Member State representatives attending the UNPFII in a specific meeting. During the annual session,

Member States also participate in bi-lateral (States and Members of the Permanent Forum) and tri-lateral (States, Members of the Permanent Forum, and UN agency representatives) meetings. The session also includes a plenary session briefing in which Member States' representatives are invited to a dialogue with the Members of the Permanent Forum.

The Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People, who operates as an institution serving the UN Commission on Human Rights, also attends the UNPFII annual session. Under the human rights item of the agenda, the Permanent Forum holds a dialogue with the Special Rapporteur who also hears public statements by indigenous organizations.

UN agency representatives from the Inter-Agency Support Group (IASG) are also provided with time and space to hold their own daily meetings during the annual session of the Permanent Forum.

Given the time constraints during plenary meetings and the need for Members of the Permanent Forum to consult among themselves on their work, closed meetings are held daily from 8:30 to 10:00 am and in the evening after 6:00 pm if required. The Members also sets aside time for some closed plenary meetings during the session to facilitate discussion and processing of recommendations.

#### **d. Cultural and Other Special Events**

In addition to the meetings described above that comprise the official work of the UNPFII during the annual session, the organizing of side events is facilitated and encouraged by SPFII. Past sessions have included more than 55 special events that touch on a variety of parallel issues and are generally hosted by UN agencies, states, indigenous organizations and other NGOs attending the UNPFII. A rich sampling of culture is made available during each annual session of the Permanent Forum, including the annual indigenous art exhibit, arts and crafts, music, dance and theatre performances, and an opening ceremony takes place at the start of the UNPFII's session. A final list of scheduled special events is posted on the UNPFII website one week prior to the session and is made available during the Forum to all Members and participants. Training sessions are organized before or during the session by NGO and academic partners.

#### **7. Recommendations**

The outcome of the annual session of the Permanent Forum is the issuance of official recommendations to the ECOSOC, as well as programs, funds and agencies of the UN, governments, indigenous and other organizations, and civil society. These recommendations serve as the primary platform for advocacy and program implementation during the year. The recommendations have a thematic focus and outline specific action that is needed to promote and protect the human rights of indigenous peoples and to improve their lives overall.

There is great time pressure on the Members of the Permanent Forum to prepare their recommendations according to deadlines set by UN Conference Services so that they can be reproduced and circulated in the six official UN languages. This is a crucial point given the fact that Forum members do not have a lingua franca. With painstaking attention to the language and content, a final version of recommendations emerges and the UNPFII Rapporteur notes any changes on the final day of adoption. The annual session comes to a close with the adoption of the report of the Permanent Forum to ECOSOC. The ECOSOC then considers the report at its regular session in July.

### **B. The Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues**

The Inter-Agency Support Group—comprised of staff members from several UN agencies—was established to support and promote the mandate of the UNPFII and indigenous issues in general within the United Nations system. It helps the UN system to analyze recommendations made by the Forum with a view to facilitating comprehensive and coordinated responses.

The IASG organizes a three-day meeting once a year—generally in September—around a chosen thematic focus relevant to indigenous peoples. The IASG uses this meeting to discuss specific agency concerns, address system gaps, develop common statements and papers, and submit an annual report to the Permanent Forum. The chair of the IASG rotates annually among agencies, and receives substantive support from the

SPFII. Twenty-four intergovernmental entities – UN system and others – are members of the IASG.

### **C. Expert Workshops**

The Permanent Forum and ECOSOC annually mandate an international expert workshop on a topic of relevance and complexity. This Workshop consolidates the expertise of the Members, indigenous experts and UN agency experts and interested Member States in a collaborative exchange. The expert workshop is organized by SPFII in January and submits the recommendations of the workshop to the annual session of the Permanent Forum. Topics of recent workshops have included data disaggregation and collection, free, prior and informed consent, indigenous traditional knowledge, and the millennium development goals.

### **D. Trust Fund on Indigenous Issues**

The Trust Fund on Indigenous Issues supports activities of the Permanent Forum, as well as the Second International Decade of the World Indigenous Peoples. A prime purpose of the Trust Fund is to fund the implementation of recommendations made by the Permanent Forum through the ECOSOC. In this respect it supports the travel of Members to international meetings of significance to the mandate of the Permanent Forum, supports language requirements of the Members, as well as appropriate and specific projects.

The Fund also supports the objectives of the Program of Action for the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. As part of its responsibilities, the Bureau of the Permanent Forum, which is comprised of the Chairperson, Rapporteur and four Vice-Chairs, acts as an advisory group on project proposals submitted to this Fund, which is administered by the Secretary-General through the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

The Trust Fund receives voluntary contributions from Member States, foundations, and other private and individual donors.

## **E. Other Permanent Forum-related Matters**

### **1. The Portfolio System**

In order to ensure broad coverage of relevant issues and to capitalize on the areas of expertise held by individual Members of the Permanent Forum, the UNPFII organizes its work through a portfolio system.

Members indicate their preferences as to the topics they would like to include in their individual portfolios. These topics include the six main areas of the Permanent Forum's mandate—economic and social development, culture, environment, education, health and human rights—as well as additional items suggested by Members. Other portfolio topics have included administration of justice, housing, children and youth, gender and women's issues, data and statistics and many

others, based on expertise available within the Forum and pressing issues for indigenous peoples.

During the year Members focus their work mostly on topics within their portfolio, often attending relevant meetings on behalf of the Forum. Portfolio topics can be shared between Members to create better coverage and collaboration on these issues of concern.

### **2. Meetings to further the mandate of the UNPFII**

Members of the Permanent Forum are invited during the year to a host of meetings regarding indigenous issues in which their advocacy and expertise is desired. These include meetings organized by inter-governmental bodies and regional indigenous networks. Assisted by SPFII, Members respond to these invitations and travel to participate in meetings in their official capacity.

Participation in such meetings throughout the year enables the Members to advocate widely on indigenous issues and for the Forum's recommendations. Special visits to agencies by a few Members take place at the invitation of agencies.

### **3. Issues of Concern**

During the year, certain urgent issues faced by indigenous peoples may arise on which Members can make a crucial intervention. Both SPFII and Members of the Permanent Forum act as eyes and ears for such issues, and they coordinate specific responses when needed. An example of this is a policy

statement made by Forum members after the Tsunami in December 2004.

Members of the Permanent Forum are also granted full immunities and privileges while exercising their official duties as Members of the Permanent Forum, and representing the Forum at relevant meetings.

### **III. Practical Information for Indigenous and civil society participants**

#### **A. Logistics for the Annual Session**

##### **1. Pre-Registration and accreditation**

Each participant is encouraged to pre-register for the annual session of the Permanent Forum. All necessary information, and forms for pre-registration are placed on the website a few months in advance of the Permanent Forum. Only three categories of participants can pre-register for the annual session: 1) indigenous peoples' organizations; 2) non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the ECOSOC; and 3) academic institutions. Based on evolving UN practice, it is left up to each indigenous peoples' organization to nominate a reasonable number of representatives to attend the annual session of the UNPFII.

Pre-registration does not mean final registration, which requires the prospective participant to physically register with the UN registration desk in the UN Secretariat building. However, pre-registration is imperative for participants from outside the United States to receive a pre-registration confirmation letter for the purpose of obtaining a visa from the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate.

##### **2. Passport and Visa**

Each participant is responsible for having a valid passport to enter the United States. It is recommended that participants contact the nearest United States Embassy or Consulate to determine whether a visa is required to enter the United States. If justification for the trip to New York is required, the pre-registration confirmation letter, should be produced for the relevant Embassy or Consulate.

##### **3. Travel**

Travel expenses to and from the annual session of the UNPFII is entirely the responsibility of the participant or his/her sponsoring organization/institution. Representatives of indigenous peoples' organization are encouraged to apply to the [Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations](#) administered by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). This Voluntary Fund is organized to fund the participation of indigenous peoples in meetings related to the Working Group on Indigenous Populations and the annual session of the UNPFII. The deadline for submission of applications is 1 October of each year. More information may

be obtained from the [OHCHR website](#).

#### **4. Accommodations**

Participants are requested to make their own arrangements for accommodations during the annual session, and are provided in advance with a list of area hotels and other logistical information on the website which can facilitate their stay in New York.

#### **5. Security and Grounds Passes**

It is necessary while attending meetings at the UN Headquarters in New York that security precautions are followed. Participants are requested to enter the building at the “Visitors’ Entrance” located on 1st Avenue between 45th and 46th streets (via the security tent). Once in the lobby, participants may proceed to the registration desk with their pre-registration confirmations (it will be marked “Registration for UNPFII”). Grounds passes are to be worn at all times while on the premises and are necessary for each entry into the building. These grounds passes must also be surrendered to UN Security upon completion of the annual session.

#### **6. Medical Clearance/Insurance**

Participants are requested to arrange at their own expense for insurance coverage including life, health and other forms deemed appropriate. The United Nations does not take responsibility for the ill health of any participant during their stay in New York.

#### **7. Local Information**

Upon arrival at the annual session in New York, SPFII staff will provide a variety of useful details on local issues and amenities, including transportation, food and recreation, and business support services at the global caucus meeting preceding the annual session.