

Summary of Conference

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The topic of *urbanization* is, as both introductory speakers noted, an unconventional one in discussions about indigenous peoples. Traditionally, the focus has been on issues related to land—deep connection with land, and its loss, often through forced evacuation. The concept of urbanization usually falls outside of the popular imagination of ‘indigenous peoples.’ But it is a crucial topic in our changing world, for today *all* indigenous peoples are affected by processes of globalization and urbanization—even the most remote, isolated and intact groups. As Broderstad points out, if we focus only on cultural “purity” then soon we will have no indigenous peoples left. Focusing on urbanization entails a new way of looking at indigenous peoples, for we are talking about an identity as *indigenous* that exists even when peoples are not living on their traditional land, and even when they may not be recognizable as ‘indigenous peoples’ according to others’ expectations of how they should ‘look.’ In this summary of the conference, I would like to return to the issues of *land* and *indigenous identity*.

The session on southern Africa raised the question of who has the right to claim the status of indigenous peoples—an issue that is especially complicated in the African setting. The recent (2007) ‘Advisory Opinion of the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ explicitly avoids giving a definition of indigenous peoples, opting instead to ‘try to bring out the main characteristics allowing the identification of the indigenous populations and communities of Africa’ (p.3). Though this document is specifically about Africa, the issues I would like to raise here are pertinent to indigenous peoples everywhere, and very relevant to the theme of the conference. Article 12 lists three ‘constitutive elements or characteristics, among others’ that the concept of indigenous embodies:

- a) Self-identification;
- b) A special attachment to and use of their traditional land whereby their ancestral land and territory have a fundamental importance for their collective physical and cultural survival as peoples;
- c) A state of subjugation, marginalisation, dispossession, exclusion, or discrimination because these peoples have different cultures, ways of life or mode of production than the national hegemonic and dominant model.

In this description lies the fundamental conundrum that faces indigenous peoples throughout the world. On the one hand, indigenous peoples are defined by an exceptionally close and long-term relationship with their land, a relationship that is central to their physical and cultural survival. Simultaneously, however, an important characteristic—and common lived experience—of indigenous peoples everywhere is *dispossession*—primarily of that very land. As (c) above indicates, this dispossession is frequently justified by the mode of production employed by indigenous peoples—i.e. hunting, gathering, herding, or small-scale agriculture—which appeared to incoming invaders as non-use.

The no-win situation that indigenous peoples are confronted with today is thus: in order to be “real” indigenous peoples they must be closely connected with their land, and yet very many (or most) have been alienated from that land. This dispossession is *also* part of the characteristic experience as indigenous peoples—yet those who have been dispossessed—a substantial proportion of whom are the urban indigenous that this conference has focused on—find their legitimacy as

indigenous peoples challenged.

There are a few points related to this emphasis on land, to the loss of land, and to questions of identity that I would like to raise here. First, while the emphasis on land is critical, as has been pointed out in this conference, we must move away from making it the sole or primary identifying marker for “real” indigenesness. Taken to the extreme, such an emphasis could mean that simply removing people from their land divorces them from their indigenous status within a generation or two, or that people who choose, as individuals or groups, to migrate elsewhere must in so doing relinquish their indigenous identities.

Secondly, as has been made clear in presentations here, indigenous identity can remain long after peoples have lost their land and most of their traditions. The examples of the Khoe (Burgess, De Wet, and in the visual presentation by Øvernes) are striking. After 300 years of explicit and deliberate attempts at eradication (physical, cultural, linguistic) *the Khoe identity persists*. They are a stunning example of the remarkable tenacity of indigenous identity, even in the face of horrific violence.

A difficulty with focusing primarily upon identity, however, is that it seems to throw the whole concept of indigenesness “up for grabs,” so to speak. This is well-illustrated by the claim of Afrikaners (or of specific groups of them), that they are indigenous peoples, as presented by Esterhuyse. This claim strikes many of us as absurd—and potentially very harmful for indigenous peoples’ movements in Africa and elsewhere. The Afrikaners certainly have a right to self-identity, and they may feel themselves to have both a special relationship with the land and feel themselves to be persecuted and “dispossessed” in modern South Africa—it is possible to imagine how a definition of “indigenous peoples” could be stretched to fit them. But to do so would stretch the definition far beyond recognition or usefulness for those whose lived experience for generations has been—and continues to be—one of violence at the hands of incoming colonizers.

Finally, by moving away from the requirement of continuing use of traditional land for indigenous identity, as has been discussed here, we do not want to go so far in the opposite direction that we minimize the importance of the deep connection with land that many indigenous peoples today *do* maintain and rely upon for cultural and physical survival. I will return to this a bit later.

In the opening talks of the conference it was suggested that the emphasis should be on the vitality of culture in the face of drastic change and urbanization, on the maintenance of identity, on the keeping of traditions—on the ways that indigenous peoples are shaping their own circumstances—even in urban areas. Many presenters here have described beautifully the ways in which this is happening.

But far more time in the presentations was devoted to describing the devastating processes through which indigenous peoples have been ‘pushed’ to the urban centres. Although the city may offer some attractive possibilities, by and large, from what we have heard here, indigenous people migrate to the cities *when they have no better option—or no other options at all*. We cannot know for sure what kind of ‘pull’ the city would exert for indigenous peoples whose economic options included maintaining their traditional hunting, gathering, fishing, herding, or agricultural livelihoods in relatively intact communities. Surely, a substantial proportion would *not* choose to remain as day labourers and squatters in an urban area if they had secure options on their traditional lands. What pull factors there are to urban areas remain elusive to most indigenous peoples—the electricity promised by the dam their lands were flooded to build remains unavailable to them; the houses that they are hired to use their carpentry skills to build are beyond reach of the squatter communities. The urban economic opportunities that they have are mostly illegal, insecure, dangerous or otherwise unsustainable.

As Doco and others pointed out, one positive result of urbanization has been increased solidarity among indigenous peoples in their common struggles, and many indigenous

individuals and groups are turning current changes to their advantage in a variety of ways. It is important to acknowledge and celebrate this, but without losing sight of the fact that, overall, the developments that have led to the process of urbanization have been devastating to indigenous communities.

A critical question then for this conference is the one posed by Rye: What does all this mean for development efforts? What can we *do*, as academics and as international aid organizations? There were some responses; Saugestad points out the need to continue support for the establishment of indigenous organizations, who can then spearhead their own projects. De Wet calls for better dissemination of information about issues affecting indigenous peoples and about their rights. Support for such efforts will be crucial for urban indigenous groups. As many participants noted, this is an ongoing discussion in the midst of changing circumstances; involved donor organizations must be willing to adjust priorities to accommodate the shift.

It is important that this not be done *at the expense of* attention to land and land issues—for this is one of the most urgent and critical issues faced by many indigenous groups today. Though we do not want to ascribe “victim” status to all urban indigenous, we don’t want to lose sight of the fact that many who have moved to urban areas have done so because it was their only or best option in the face of loss of traditional land and / or livelihoods. Where situations like this are imminent and possibly preventable, and where it is possible to support non-violent resistance to it, this should also remain a priority for academic and donor assistance.

This conference has brought to the fore the urgent issues of urbanization and migration that confront indigenous peoples everywhere. While the conference itself was not meant to be conclusive, it has made a very important contribution to the ongoing dialogue.

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The theme of the meeting this year had its background in the fact that an increasing number of indigenous peoples live in cities and urban areas. In the near future we will see that in some countries the majority of indigenous peoples will have left their homelands to live in the cities. However, development assistance to indigenous peoples is primarily being given to indigenous peoples living in rural areas. This reflects preferences among the public and many NGOs. In this situation, the Forum meeting focused upon migration and the development of identity and organization among indigenous peoples in cities and urban areas. The Forum is an advisory to NORAD.

Of the four conference sessions, three were dedicated to the theme and one session on general issues relating to indigenous peoples in development.

One session focused on the Philippines with two presentations: Geraldine Doco from the Cordillera Peoples Alliance and Rune Paulsen from Rainforest Foundation Norway. Geraldine Doco reported on the historical background of the strong indigenous movement in the Cordillera and the urban organizations. Rune Paulsen commented on this presentation.

The second session focused on South Africa. Presentations were given by Jean Burgess, Ghonaqua KhoeKhoe Peoples, Cape Town; Priscilla De Wet, University of Free State; Petro Esterhuyse, University of Free State; and Siv Øvernes showed her film “Street living and Khoe San identity.” Jean Burgess gave a historical overview of the origin and development of indigenous identities in relation to factors such as oppression, apartheid, class development and urbanization. Priscilla De Wet focused on the conscious work to re-construct and reconfirm indigenous identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Siv Øvernes’ film addressed the same theme based upon the life of an indigenous woman that had lived on the streets of Cape Town. Petro Esterhuyse talked about the endeavours of 500 Afrikaners living in the community of Orania to

be recognised as an indigenous group.

There was a general session “Aspects of Migration and Urbanization” with presentations from Lily Muñoz and Tomás López from Guatemala and Bjørg Evjen, Tromsø. The presentations from Guatemala dealt with the human rights situation in the country. Bjørg Evjen dealt with a group of Sea Sámi who, in a historical perspective, have successfully developed from a visible over to an invisible to a visible position again in the society.

In the last session, Mattias Åhrén from the Sámi Council reported on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, its significance and the way in which it is a major breakthrough. Simon Rye from NORAD talked about indigenous peoples in the Norwegian development cooperation and Rune Paulsen reflected on the marginal position of indigenous peoples in Norwegian development aid.

All presentations dealt with identity and reconfiguration as an integrated part of the identity of indigenous peoples who have been suppressed and urbanized. The rural-urban linkages seem to be key to most indigenous peoples and the existence of an indigenous homeland as ever-present; there is also a development from stressing control of land to reconfiguration and control of identity in the urban areas. Historically, indigenous peoples are victims of colonisation, but all presentations also focused on indigenous peoples and individuals as actors in their own futures. As groups, indigenous peoples must organise themselves and as individuals they must remake their own lives. There has also been a tendency to put too much focus on the essentialist part of the urban and revived identity, and too little relational thinking that limits or provides for new types of organizational structures. In the South African case as well as in the case from the Sea Sami it was strongly emphasised that in spite of hundreds of years of suppression there remains an indigenous identity. The circumstances predict the specific markers that will take the key positions in a reconfigured identity.

The history of indigenous peoples moving into urban areas is characterised by social upheaval. The push factors are well-known: evictions from land, poverty, and not the least violence and militarisation. In all of the cases, except in the Sámi area, indigenous peoples have been victims of violence against their human rights. In some regions the pull factor drawing indigenous individuals into towns have become stronger than the push factors. The need for education is significant in this respect. The social life in the towns is often complicated and the indigenous individuals face new types of discrimination. In some places indigenous migrants are treated as squatters who do not speak the language of the city, implying that they are without the same rights (voting) and possibilities (member of labour unions) as other town dwellers and they end up being cheap labourers. In other countries like South Africa, the indigenous peoples have been victims of racism that classify them as a category of their own.

Social upheaval opens for a process in which old traditions are given new meaning. Examples were given from the Philippine Cordillera in which the elders were given a new role of mediating in tribal conflicts based upon an old tradition, and in South Africa where traditional sharing of food (‘nau’) achieved a new (ethnic) significance.

With reference to a small Afrikaner community, Orania, Petro Estherhuyse took up the issue of the definition of indigenous peoples. Although the issue of indigenous peoples in Africa is controversial, the response of the audience was that the situation of the Afrikaners was not the point of departure to discuss this issue.

Simon Rye (NORAD) and others took up the implications of the conference on NORAD’s policy on indigenous peoples. The overall conclusion of this debate seems to be that there is a great need to focus on policy implementation. It was highlighted that only 19% –nineteen per cent–of the earmarked NORAD funding for indigenous projects actually reach indigenous peoples. It was also mentioned that the adoption of the UN Declaration might have or should have implications for NORAD’s policy. The perspective in this was highlighted by Matias Åhrén

in his presentation where he stressed that the Declaration, in a number of respects, was a major breakthrough, not least in matters relevant to development issues.