

Indigenous America: Facing Other Inconvenient Truths

This column is a reply to Steven Newcomb's "[Some Questions Regarding the UN High-Level Plenary Meeting](#)."

Steven Newcomb's essay on the UN High-Level Plenary Session called the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples—that will convene in New York City on the 22nd of September, 2014—reflects the view shared by some of his readers that the World Conference is supposed to be a panacea to right all of the past wrongs done to indigenous peoples. He asks if the World Conference will reverse “the domination/subordination framework of U.S. federal Indian law and policy that has been and continues to be used against our originally free nations and peoples?” The answer is “not likely,” but that doesn't mean there aren't compelling reasons for participating, or that there aren't other ways to address the relationship between the US and Indian nations.

Realists have long recognized that the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, as proposed by Bolivia's President Evo Morales (he is an Aymara), is not a forum for indigenous nations to sit as equals with states' governments to work out a redress of all past wrongs. It is a small opportunity to press for a long-delayed dialogue and future negotiations that can, among other things, begin to define and formalize an appropriate political status for indigenous nations in the global arena that simultaneously doesn't threaten states' stability.

Indigenous nations in the United States and the world over must begin to consider and resolve some of their own “inconvenient truths.” Consider these facts:

1. Of the 6,000 or so indigenous nations in the world virtually none have an internationally recognized political identity as a nation of people with collective interests, authority over peoples, use of lands and resources (the UN says 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity is in indigenous territories).
2. In the US, the on-reservation populations of Indian people have the most direct influence over tribal government decisions while off-reservation Indians have little or no influence except in a few instances.
3. 60 percent of the on-reservation population overall in the United States is made up of non-tribal, non-Indians.
4. Indigenous America's population is growing at a rate of 2.9 percent annually compared to the US population growth at 0.7 percent, with a prospective result by 2050 of more than 6.745 million people. The question will be whether or not this is the US government's population to represent or populations represented by Indian governments?
5. UN Member States claim the authority to represent indigenous peoples within their boundaries as individual citizens of the state, negating the collective identity of each nation. On July 17th, the Russian Dumas essentially declared that there are no indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation under their new “nationalities policy”. China has a similar policy.
6. Indigenous NGOs tend to advocate “indigenous peoples' rights” which dilutes the significance of indigenous nations as political entities, unwittingly fostering the state position following the Human

Rights Declaration of “individual rights.”

7. Indigenous NGOs currently have more influence in the UN than indigenous governments.

I agree with Newcomb that most indigenous peoples on the ground do not know what is going on with the World Conference or the many meetings concerning bio-diversity, intellectual property, trade relations, and the rights of indigenous peoples in the international arena. Here are some concrete suggestions for building the foundations for realistic engagement in the international arena and toward a political shift in the relations between states and indigenous nations:

1. First, indigenous nations should set a goal to formalize the international identity of indigenous nations as political entities with governing powers within the international environment.
2. There remains no working or agreed-upon framework for US/Tribal engagement on the World Conference or the UNDRIP. Continue to press the US government and other states' governments to come to the table.
3. Indian, Alaskan Native, and Hawaiian leaders must be positioned at home to receive information about international developments, get support translating that information and they must communicate with their members to explain what benefits and pitfalls exist that affect their interests and well-being.
4. Build bridges between indigenous nations, NGO's, and individuals to end the divisiveness prompted and promoted by personal egos and by the US government's "recognition" policies.
5. NGOs must move from a Washington, D.C. focus and shift resources to directly supporting indigenous governments with information, analysis, and on-the-ground training to strengthen tribal capacity. Indigenous governments should budget resources to support protection of their interests internationally.
6. Indigenous-oriented philanthropic foundations must be pushed to provide funds to tribal communities and NGOs for community information and education on matters directly affecting their interests.
7. NGOs must immediately begin give precedence and defer to indigenous governments in the international environment to establish their presence and to build experience and capacity.
8. Indigenous governments are the only legitimate political instruments Indian Country has to advance indigenous policies, even as flawed as they are. We must focus on building and strengthening their capacity politically and functionally to engage the international arena, within intergovernmental framework agreements.
9. Indigenous governments must be encouraged to extend the franchise to members not only adjacent to their reservation or territory but in distant locations to rebuild tribal consensus. Cherokee, Navajo, and Colville currently do.

These are positive and constructive steps indigenous nations can and must take to deal with the consequences of globalization and ensure that they become part of the process to protect and advance their interests. As Grandfather Oren Lyons of Onondaga has said, “if we aren't at the table, then we will definitely be on the menu.”

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