



Indigenous Partners in New York

Representatives of COICA at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

The 18th meeting of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) was held in New York from 22 April to 3 May 2019. Together with over 1,000 indigenous representatives, **COICA**, Climate Alliance's partner also took part in the forum. In various meetings and side events, indigenous delegates from all over the world drew attention to their personal, political and legal situation and exchanged views on possible ways of action. The UNPFII was established in 2000. Its mandate: to deal with indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights.

As part of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages, the theme of the meeting was "Traditional Knowledge: Generations, transmission and protection". In her opening speech, Maria Fernanda Espinoza, Chair of the UN General Assembly, underlined: "Let us not forget that traditional knowledge held by indigenous peoples occupies a pivotal role in the actions undertaken to mitigate and adapt to climate change."

Below is a summary of the contributions of COICA president Gregorio Mirabal and Robinson López Descanse, vice-president of Climate Alliance and Coordinator for Climate Change and Biodiversity of the COICA, as well as an overview of the results of the two-week meeting.

"IT'S DIFFICULT TO MAKE SUGGESTIONS WHEN THE DOORS ARE CLOSED." *Gregorio Mirabal, President of COICA*

On 23 April 2019, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative organised the accompanying event "Forest Defenders: New Threats and New Responses", which was attended by around 600 participants and the president of COICA, Gregorio Mirabal.

In his contribution, he vehemently underlines the duty of joint protest in order to be heard by states. Representatives of indigenous peoples must work together with social and environmental organisations, religious communities, artists and scientists to defend their rights and end the criminalisation of (indigenous) activists. In his contribution, he presents the demand of COICA and other organisations to establish a protection zone that ex-

tends across the continent from the Andes, through the Amazon region to the Atlantic Ocean. He emphasized the commitment to protect sacred indigenous water basins (*cuencas sagradas*).

Immediately after his speech, Mirabal left the Forum to join thousands of comrades in the **Terra Livre protest camp** (Free Country) in front of the seat of government in Brasilia from 23 to 26 April. The 15th edition of the camp focused on President Jair Bolsonaro's policy of massively restricting indigenous rights, and his decision to withdraw the governmental protection agency for indigenous interests and their culture (FUNAI) from the influential Ministry of Justice and assign it to the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights. In addition, FUNAI should be deprived of jurisdiction to define and expand indigenous territories. This should be handed over to the Ministry of Agriculture, which is heavily influenced by the agricultural lobby and pays little regard to indigenous peoples. Other criticisms include the dilution of environmental criminal law, the plan to stop punishing agricultural activities in nature reserves and indigenous territories, and the facilitation of the firearms law. According to reports, these are repeatedly used by big landowners against indigenous people, small farmers and landless people.

One month after the Terra Livre protest camp there is good news, after a decision of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate the government's decision to restructure FUNAI is reversed.

Click [here](#) for the video of Gregorio Mirabal's speech (in Spanish).

"WE REMAIN ACTIVE IN THE DEFENSE OF OUR RIGHTS AND THE RIGHTS OF MOTHER EARTH." *Robinson Lopéz Descanse, Vice-president of climate alliance and Coordinator for Climate Change and Biodiversity of the COICA*

In his input, Robinson Lopéz Descanse, Vice-president of climate alliance and Coordinator for Climate Change and Biodiversity of the COICA, refers to the economic interests of states and multinationals exploiting the Amazon region, the green "lung of the world", for their own benefit without respecting the rights of indigenous peoples or the environment. He uses the example of Colombia to explain the circumstances. Three factors determine the situation: the influence of transnational companies, the effects of growth-oriented development and the specific domestic situation with the context of armed (post-)conflict.

He outlines the current situation in the country with the following points:

- Many indigenous peoples are threatened in their physical and cultural existence.
- Activists who advocate for (indigenous) individual, collective and land rights suffer from persecution in the post-conflict context. This situation can be observed in all nine countries of the Amazon region: murders, threats, attacks, forced displacement of indigenous leaders by both non-state (armed groups, drug cartels) and state actors are not rare. The population can hardly count on institutional protection.
- The agreements negotiated in the peace treaty between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP guerrilla are insufficiently implemented. Specifically, he mentions the persistence of illicit crops (mainly coca) and the conflict over territorial control of these areas. The rights and autonomy of indigenous communities living there are not taken into consideration. Furthermore, he criticizes the lack of guarantees and compensation for indigenous peoples in the context of transitional justice mechanisms.
- The peace treaty facilitates large-scale corporate projects, intensive extraction of natural resources and the pharmaceutical industry's influence. Their activities, which are guided by economic interests, contribute massively to the destruction of the tropical rainforest and the forced displacement of the people living there.

It is therefore all the more urgent, according to Lopéz Descanse, that the Forum develops strategies for the protection of the Amazon region and the observance of human rights for the activists and the population living there.

OUTCOMES OF THE 18TH SESSION

The Forum emphasised the central role of indigenous peoples in the implementation of the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. It also stressed the priority of protecting indigenous languages to preserve traditional knowledge, an important part of global climate protection.

The Forum is also a high-level advisory body to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) dedicated to the following areas: higher standards of living, full employment, economic and social progress; facilitating international cultural and educational cooperation; and encouraging universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Accordingly, the Forum forwards decisions and recommendations to the ECOSOC. In 2019, this concerns three decisions on the future work of the Council and nine reports on the issues discussed at the Forum.

The decisions:

- Calling for a three-day meeting of an international expert group on “Peace, justice and strong institutions: the role of indigenous peoples in implementing Sustainable Development Goal 16” (SDG 16: Peace, Justice and strong Institutions)
- Setting the date for the 19th session of the UNPFII in New York (13 to 14 April 2020)
- Provisional agenda for that meeting

The original resolutions can be found [here](#).

The reports:

- Report on [agenda and the proceedings](#) of the 18th meeting
- Report on the [alarming state of the world's indigenous languages](#): Among other measures, the Forum recommends that the UN General Assembly proclaims the International Decade of Indigenous Languages from the beginning of 2021 – considering the rapid disappearance of indigenous languages. In addition, member states should establish programmes to revitalise and promote indigenous languages in cooperation with indigenous peoples.
- Report on the [protection of intellectual property](#): The Forum points out that there is currently no legal instrument offering sufficient protection for traditional knowledge. In this context, they recommend that the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) revises existing legal instruments with an emphasis on human rights and customary law.
- Report on the [situation of indigenous human rights activists](#): The Forum repeats its deep concern that activists who campaign for indigenous rights are under great pressure, threatened, criminalised, persecuted or even killed. Consequently, the Forum calls on member states to conduct investigations and draw legal consequences in these cases. It also stresses the importance of reporting cases of threats and human rights violations to the UN.
- Report on the [implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#): The Forum criticises the lack of implementation of the [Declaration](#) adopted in 2007. It formulates the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples, i.e. their right to preserve and develop their institutions, traditions, cultures and identities, and prohibits discrimination and marginalisation. It also recognises the right to self-determination over lands, territories and resources and stresses the right to free, in-

formed and prior consent (FPIC) as formalised in ILO Convention 169.

- Report on **future work**: The Forum commissions three studies to be presented at the 19th Meeting 2020 – “Best practices in the protection of indigenous peoples’ lands, territories and resources: A case of hunter gatherers in East Africa”, “Indigenous Peoples Autonomies: experiences and perspectives” and “The development of standards and redress mechanisms for protecting indigenous peoples’ rights in conservation”.
- Report on the **Agenda 2030**: The Forum expresses concern that indigenous peoples do not receive sufficient or appropriate information on the implementation of Agenda 2030. It stresses the importance of collecting and processing data to monitor the implementation process and ensure that indigenous peoples are not neglected.
- Report on the **implementation of the six mandated areas**: The Forum reminds the ECOSOC of the wide range of actions that need to be pursued in these areas. A selection of topics: financial support for indigenous initiatives and their involvement in the process of designing action and strategy plans, awareness raising and promotion of traditional food systems, bilingual education, rights and protection of indigenous midwives, treatment of diseases such as tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS or a study on forced sterilization of indigenous people.
- Report on Dialogue with Indigenous Peoples, Member States and United Nations specialized agencies: The Forum highlights good practices, opportunities and challenges in this area and emphasises the importance of national action plans. The Forum also drew up recommendations for the World Food Organisation (FAO) with reference to the High-level Expert Seminar on Indigenous Food Systems, held in November 2018. It stresses the need to work intensively together with indigenous youth and women.

FIND OUT MORE

- **[UNPFII’s website](#)**
- **[Article of the SDG Knowledge Hubs on the 18th session of the Forum](#)**
- **[UN-Press Release on the closing of the 18th session](#)**

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THE CLIMATE ALLIANCE

For more than 25 years, Climate Alliance member municipalities have been acting in partnership with indigenous rainforest peoples for the benefit of the global climate. With some 1,700 members spread across 26 European countries, Climate Alliance is the world's largest city network dedicated to climate action and the only one to set tangible targets: each member city, town and district has committed itself to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 10 percent every 5 years. Recognising the impact our lifestyles can have on the world's most vulnerable people and places, Climate Alliance pairs local action with global responsibility. climatealliance.org