

Preface

The Importance of Indicators

This address was invited by Dan Beavon, Jerry White, and Peter Dinsdale, Co-Chairs for the Aboriginal Policy Research Conference in Ottawa on March 23, 2006. At this conference the United Nations held a consultative forum on the issues of indicators. In this closing address Elsa Stamatopoulou outlines her views on the importance of developing research on well-being indicators.

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[...]

Indicators are a difficult issue, they take long to develop and they are a so-called sensitive matter, at the UN and elsewhere. They raise the issue of the definition of no more and no less than what is happiness, or what Socrates called “the highest good.”

Some years back, when I was working in OHCHR, I was very involved with our team in trying to integrate human rights in the UN system’s development work and we had a really difficult time with indicators: our colleagues from the development agencies thought that our language was from another planet! Such conceptual differences are not unfamiliar to Indigenous peoples when they try to put forward their visions of their own development—and it is sure that one of the challenges is one of communication, of cultural translation between Indigenous development visions and non-Indigenous development visions.

One day a seminar was organized in NY on good governance indicators by high level experts of an important state: they said they had been working on good governance indicators for 13 years, with inconclusive results ... In our work during this conference, on Indigenous peoples and indicators of well-being I am thinking: the states can wait, the intergovernmental organizations can wait, but Indigenous peoples cannot wait.

A. The Work of the UNPFII

The development of data and indicators that capture the situation of Indigenous peoples based on their own perceptions and aspirations is a methodological priority of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. This priority is due to the

overwhelming invisibility of Indigenous peoples in national censuses and other surveys which measure progress and inform policy initiatives in a large number of countries. We understand from certain global estimates that Indigenous peoples in most parts of the world are marginalized and disproportionately constitute a significant number of the world's most impoverished people. We also know from statistical data that many Indigenous peoples in the developed world are living in conditions of the so called 'Fourth World.' The Permanent Forum therefore believes that disaggregation of data is an essential strategy to bring more visibility to the disparities and address the situation of Indigenous peoples. Without such data, or relevant indicators for measuring Indigenous peoples' well-being, mainstream models of development intervention are often thrust upon Indigenous peoples based on assumptions that they work, thereby resulting in inappropriate development policies, forcible assimilation, and dependency on certain welfare-oriented service delivery models.

In response to these issues, the Permanent Forum organized a workshop on data collection and disaggregation in January 2004. The workshop noted a number of important conclusions and recommendations which were consequently adopted by the Permanent Forum. Some of the key observations of the workshop included: that data collection and disaggregation should help "detect discrimination, inequality, and exclusion of Indigenous peoples, both individually and as a group" and it should be 'culturally specific' and relevant to the problems identified by Indigenous peoples.¹ The workshop also noted the necessity of qualitative and human rights indicators to assess the true social situation of Indigenous peoples.

Some of the key recommendations of the workshop included: the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples in data collection; the involvement of Indigenous peoples themselves in data collection, analysis and reporting; and the desirability of long-term standardized data based on multiple identification criteria developed with the full participation of local Indigenous peoples. The workshop also noted that data collection exercises should be conducted in local languages and employ local Indigenous interviewers.

Based on this work, last year, the Permanent Forum stated that "... Poverty indicators based on Indigenous peoples' own perception of their situation and experiences should be developed jointly with Indigenous peoples."²

B. The Ottawa Conference in a Global Perspective

Let me explain how this conference, including the international expert meeting we conducted, fits within a global process and effort that will feed into the Permanent Forum and the international system.

In fact, during this year, in addition to the meeting in Ottawa which focused on Indigenous peoples in developed countries and indicators of well-being, we will hold three more regional meetings on participatory indicator-setting, in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Africa and in Asia. Parallel to this effort,

the Interagency Support Group on Indigenous Issues, which brings together 29 UN and other intergovernmental organizations, has prepared and submitted to the Forum's session this coming May its own paper and survey of Indigenous-related indicators that already exist and also identifying the gaps. The results of all the regional meetings and the UN survey will then be synthesized, so that a number of core global and regional indicators can be proposed, through the Permanent Forum to the UN system, and other intergovernmental organizations, including IFIs, governments, the private sector and other civil society actors, as for example conservationist organizations. They can also be used by Indigenous peoples themselves.

I am pleased that our international expert group meeting on Indigenous Peoples and Indicators of Well-being—the first in the series we are planning—has come to a successful conclusion. And we are grateful to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, and the co-hosts [The University of Western Ontario and the National Association of Friendship Centres], for co-sponsoring this workshop. The workshop brought in Indigenous experts from the Russian Federation, the Arctic, First Nations of Canada, Native America, Australia, and New Zealand to discuss work done on indicators of relevance to Indigenous peoples within their respective regions with the following objectives in mind:

- 1) Identify gaps in existing indicators at the global, regional, and national levels that assess the situation of Indigenous peoples and impact policy making, governance, and program development, including from a gender perspective.
- 2) Examine work being done to improve indicators so that they take into account Indigenous peoples and their concerns and assess them according to qualitative and quantitative criteria, including a gender perspective.
- 3) Examine linkages between quantitative and qualitative indicators, particularly indicators that look at processes affecting Indigenous peoples
- 4) Propose the formulation of core global and regional indicators that address the specific concerns and situations of Indigenous peoples, including Indigenous women and can also be used by international financial institutions, the UN system and other intergovernmental organizations, including regional ones.

C. The Main Results of the International Workshop on Indigenous Peoples and Indicators of Well-being

- (A) Our meeting highlighted **the necessity and importance of indicators for understanding and measuring the quality of life of Indigenous peoples-according to their own perceptions**. In particular, the meeting addressed the **question of measurement, i.e. what is being measured**

and according to whose standards and whose visions—is it government or Indigenous peoples themselves? Existing international and national indicator frameworks developed by governments and international institutions in many parts of the world often times do not capture the situation or inadequately capture the situation of Indigenous peoples. For example, an indicator such as the proportion of population below \$1/day may not capture Indigenous peoples' perception of poverty. Indigenous peoples may perceive their own poverty in terms of lack of access to and integrity of their traditional lands, forests, scarcity and threats to traditional seeds, plant medicines, food animals, or integrity of and access to sacred sites.

- (B) A second focus of the discussions was **the gap in determinants of well-being amidst Indigenous peoples relative to the general population.**
- (C) Thirdly, **indicators were highlighted as a means for supporting data development, policy, and program responses.** In many countries, collection techniques often overlook or are unable to determine the quality of life and well-being of Indigenous peoples. Inappropriate techniques or the lack of disaggregated data often place us in a quandary in terms of further data development in Indigenous communities. **One method for breaking the cycle of data gaps is to develop indicators that are both statistically relevant and culturally appropriate as a means of capturing more precise and relevant information.** When public policies are top-down, they result in improper and culturally irrelevant statistical information. And we all know that indicator and statistical frameworks inform debates and decision-making amongst Indigenous peoples themselves as much as government

An important issue to capture in indicator setting is the particular situation of Indigenous women and gender more comprehensively—and also the situation of IPs though the whole span of their life: children, youth, and elders.

We were encouraged to hear about some important efforts of Indigenous peoples themselves and others to capture culturally sensitive and relevant indicators of well-being, showing that good work is really possible if the will is there. As one of our Maori participants from New Zealand repeatedly stressed, in doing this work on indicators and statistics “we need to continue to stay in a solution mode.”

Participation as the Permeating Theme

The Permanent Forum strongly believes that indicators and disaggregated data are important not just as a measure of the situation of Indigenous peoples, but as a vital strategy in improving their lives by capturing their aspirations and world views, promoting development with identity, protecting and promoting their cultures and integrity as Indigenous peoples and empowering them to utilize such information to their benefit.

I am confident to state today that, what we heard with the most clarity in the discussions we held is that **unless Indigenous peoples themselves participate fully and effectively in data collection and the establishment of indicators, efforts will likely be incomplete, baseless, or irrelevant, and essentially provide too fragile a foundation for wise policies, including public resource allocations.**

It is ironic and unacceptable that a number of mainstream discourses on poverty and development still continue to exclude and marginalize Indigenous peoples. It is only through the full and effective participation of Indigenous peoples in research, including in data collection and the setting of indicators, that we can go beyond the discourses to action that will improve Indigenous peoples' lives.

In the final analysis, indicators are about listening to Indigenous peoples, they are about a true dialogue between Indigenous peoples and the rest of society, they are about being open to Indigenous world views and respecting them.

The theme of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People adopted by the General Assembly last December is "Partnership for action and dignity." The word "dignity" is linked to fundamental human rights and freedoms. **And we all know, that there is no dignity without participation.**

This is our major challenge. Let us respond to it.

Endnotes

- 1 Report of the Workshop on Data Collection and Disaggregation for Indigenous Peoples to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Third Session, E/C.19/2004/2.
- 2 Paragraph 15, Report of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues on its Fourth Session, E/C.19/2005/9