Introduction

Addressing the Inequalities thematic consultation, UNICEF and the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, in partnership with civil society, co-organized a global e-discussion on indigenous peoples and inequality. The consultations were aimed at capturing the voices of indigenous peoples from around the world. Online participants were asked to share their thoughts and ideas for envisioning a world free from inequalities. At the time of writing, over a hundred people contributed to the e-discussion on indigenous peoples and inequality. The most salient issues and key messages arising from this vibrant exchange which took place between 27 November to 19 December 2012 are summarized below.

Box 1: Priority Areas for Indigenous Peoples

1. Recognition of indigenous peoples at national and international levels;
2. Recognition of indigenous peoples’ collective rights, in particular the right to land, territories and natural resources;
3. Enactment of intercultural and cultural-sensitive policies at the national level, especially in the areas of education and health;
4. Prioritization of the special conditions and needs of indigenous women, children, youth and indigenous persons with disabilities;
5. Recognition of culture as the 4th pillar of sustainable development, and the inclusion of the indigenous view of development with culture and identity;
6. Enactment of the right to free, prior and informed consent in all matters affecting indigenous peoples;
7. Establishment of partnerships for development issues relating to indigenous peoples.

The voices and the issues

"I believe the first inequality faced by indigenous peoples is the right to exist" Katarina Gray-Sharp. One of the most widely voiced issues was the lack of recognition of indigenous peoples at both national and international levels. The views expressed were about the marginalization, exclusion and denial as indigenous peoples by the State, and exclusion in the Millennium Development Goals and related MDGs reports. Also, there was concern that indigenous peoples have been overlooked by governments and their partners in the pursuance of MDG 8 – Global Partnership for Development. The fact that indigenous peoples are excluded from many important processes was identified as a major cause for inequality faced by indigenous peoples. Some contributors cited the ‘ invisibility’ of indigenous peoples as another major cause for their inequalities. Unfortunately, many States argue that they do not have indigenous peoples, only minorities, and therefore do not qualify to be part of the UN's/international community's debate on “indigenous peoples”. Several contributors emphasized the need to recognize and protect indigenous peoples’ collective rights, including their customary laws community governance institutions and forms of representations, land tenure systems and productive activities, all of which have been customary practices.

“When big financial issues are at stake, as is the case with mineral resources, indigenous rights are easily put aside” Gerard Willemsen. A second area of consensus is the essential importance of recognizing indigenous peoples’ right to their land, territories and natural resources. Contributors drew attention to the major violations occurring, such as land grabbing and unfair
competition exercised by States and private investors/companies, exploitation of natural resources by extractive industries, resource-based conflicts, and lack of recognition of customary tenure systems. This impairs indigenous peoples’ rights to access and use forests, ancestral lands and natural resources. It also exposes indigenous peoples to the effects of climate change, disrupts their social unity and exacerbates their situation.

“Maori in New Zealand are over represented in all the worst social indicators - health, welfare, justice/corrections etc. Much of this can be traced as the consequences of colonization inclusive of loss of land, self government, culture, language and economic capacity. Other factors include the urban drift away from cultural roots and more recent neo liberal economic policies which have helped greater levels of poverty” Ian Hutson. The issue of the historical past of colonization, assimilation and dispossession was widely discussed as the key determinant of inequalities for indigenous peoples. There is consensus in tracing inequalities in income, health, education, justice, etc. as the consequences of colonization. In addition, assimilation policies, together with economic policies that have negative impact on indigenous peoples and are forcing indigenous peoples to migrate to cities. Contributors underlined that urbanization has brought about greater levels of poverty, disruption to social cohesion as well as disruption to indigenous peoples’ food and nutrition systems, due to lack of access to forests, lands and to traditional income-generating activities. Several contributors called upon development planners and policy-makers to take into account multiculturalism, in order to capture the heterogeneous realities of indigenous peoples, in order to aim at national integration, instead of assimilation.

‘It is necessary to create mechanisms for full and effective participation of indigenous youth in decision-making spaces, taking into account the digital divide, and we have to be in the areas of analysis, debate and generation of proposals which have to do with indigenous peoples [...] such as post-2015 agenda’. Dali Angel. Participants identified specific situations related to certain groups within indigenous communities. Systemic poverty exacerbates inequality, especially for indigenous women, children and youth, who are particularly affected by the lack of access to health services, housing, and revenues. This is because these groups are among the most marginalized and discriminated groups, and they also suffer high rates of different forms of violence. Non-sustainable development, extractive industries, policies originating from colonial and patriarchal systems and doctrines, which include, among others, environmental, sexual and physical violence, have particularly negative impacts on indigenous women and children. They suffer not only from disproportionate health impacts, but also from disruption to their local economic and cultural activities. Extractive Industries such as mining and oil drilling also increase levels of sexual violence and sexual exploitation of women and girls in indigenous communities around the world. They often pay the greatest consequences for environment degradation and for conflicts within their own countries. Indigenous women are particularly marginalized in addition to being vulnerable to sexual violence as well as having lack of access to culturally appropriate health and education services. They suffer from a double-discrimination, discrimination as women in their own communities and being indigenous women in the larger non-indigenous society. Contributors agreed that some indigenous peoples, such as pastoralist communities have traditional lifestyles and needs that cannot be met by standard service delivery models. However, research for alternative solutions that are in harmony with such livelihood systems is still lagging behind. This exclusion is compounded by widespread discrimination against pastoralists from the majority population. Indigenous youth called upon States to create effective mechanisms that ensure their significant participation in decision-making processes, both at local and national levels, and at international level, including the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

‘[Indigenous peoples’] right to health can only be realized when the social, political and economic determinants of health are tackled’ Sarah Edwards and Corinna Heineke. Inequality in health was widely discussed. Contributors highlighted the fact that indigenous peoples experience the worst health outcomes both nationally and globally, for example in maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition, mortality, alcoholism and suicide. On-line participants pointed out that there is lack of adequate public policies on health to adopt a culturally sensitive approach towards indigenous peoples as well as the lack of access to health centers and hospitals. There was consensus on the need to focus attention on indigenous peoples with disabilities, whose living
conditions have not been adequately studied and addressed in many countries. Contributors pointed out that the MDGs have set average health goals which are fragmented into compartments, in contrast with indigenous peoples’ holistic understanding of health and well-being. In addition, the MDGs do not capture the structural causes of health inequality for indigenous peoples, mainly due to socio-economic determinants, such as forced displacement; degradation of indigenous lands and waters; cultural discrimination; poor access to education, employment and social services; decline of socio-political structures, and poor access to healthcare, due to barriers often caused by poverty, geography, or cultural factors such as language, compounded by discrimination, racism and a lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity. Other contributors emphasized that current environmental factors, such as the decline of traditional food sources and industrial activity on indigenous peoples’ lands has increased urbanization, changed lifestyles, and led to greater reliance on unhealthy and imported processed foods in indigenous communities, which increases risk factors. There was consensus on some recommendations for the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The recommendations underlined the human rights based approach to health. This approach addresses the social determinants of poor health in indigenous peoples and tackles structural barriers to health care with culturally appropriate programmes and policies that fully involve indigenous peoples. This will be critical for reducing health inequalities. These measures further requires the transformation of economic and political structures and perceiving health as a cross-cutting issue that requires the incorporation of an intercultural and holistic approach to health in public policies. Suggestions have also been made at overcoming inequalities in the sphere of health, such as: use of indigenous languages in health centres, introduction of mobile clinics to reach remote communities, participation of indigenous peoples in decision-making processes about their health, expanded presence of indigenous peoples within the health workforce, and integration of traditional knowledge, medicines and practices into the broader health systems. Data must be disaggregated along the major fault lines of inequity, including ethnicity. Data is also needed on indigenous peoples with disability and their living conditions.

“In order that helpful educational policies can be implemented, there is a need for increasingly supportive and non-conflicting language and education policies that affirm and protect language diversity.” Matthew Wisbey. An important point made repeatedly is the need to understand that education is the cornerstone of development and that investment in education and preservation of language diversity for indigenous peoples is essential. Indigenous peoples face inequality in access to education in general, due to their geographic and politically marginalized status, as well as in terms of respect for their diverse cultures and languages. Gaps exist in access to primary, secondary, technical and university levels for indigenous children, youth and women. Families are often not in a position to pay for school fees and other operating costs, which often leads to high school drop-out rate. The lack of public policies to promote an intercultural, bilingual system of education has to be tackled urgently. Structural obstacles to the full and effective implementation of an intercultural and multilingual approach to education still persist. No doubt, indigenous languages should be recognized officially and the right to be educated in indigenous languages should be put into practice. The majority contributors agreed that unless indigenous peoples are provided with satisfactory opportunities to learn and use a national/international language alongside their first language, they are very often unable to access development opportunities and are restricted from fully contributing to the national economy.

“Maintaining my Buryat identity in today’s globalised world is not only about preserving the traditions, retaining the religion and being respectful towards my homeland, my family and the environment; to me, it is also about remaining loyal to myself, my values and principles formed on the basis of this heritage. I believe [...] it is these values that are vital to a sustainable future.” Esuna Dugarova. This quote and others emphasizes the interconnection between culture and identity in indigenous peoples’ view of development. Contributors argued that far too often a ‘one size fits all’ approach to development is harmful to indigenous peoples. For example, current indicators of poverty do not capture the specificities of indigenous peoples’ perceptions of poverty and well-being, which are often closely linked to the recognition and implementation of their collective rights, for example, access to land. The importance of the spiritual aspects of indigenous cultures and their harmony with nature should not be underestimated. Furthermore, the various forms of inequality experienced by indigenous
peoples can be attributed to structural factors of socio-cultural injustices. There was consensus on placing culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. This would assist in securing the implementation of a human rights-based approach to development that is inclusive of cultural rights. Contributors argued that traditional knowledge is closely interconnected with and inter-dependent on bioresources, landscapes, cultural and spiritual values and customary laws. They also felt that customary law is considered weaker than formal law and therefore respectful links are needed between the legal structures of different cultures. This would allow the different legal systems to recognize one another without one dominating the other. Cultural diversity in the evolving information society and also within internet governance is one of the main concerns for indigenous peoples. Contributors emphasized the need for meaningful inclusion in decision-making and public discussions on processes such as the recognition of indigenous historical and sacred sites as heritage sites.

“The development or whatever activities carried out in indigenous peoples land and territory should be based in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the right to free prior and informed consent must be respected”. BM Damai. The majority of participants highlighted the low representation and political participation of indigenous men and women in State institutions. Where constitutions or international treaties exist, which recognize indigenous peoples, full and effective implementation is necessary, including the establishment of positive actions and other mechanisms to ensure the participation of indigenous peoples in policy and decision-making processes. Contributors also argued that the lack of definition, implementation, and consultation by national courts, as well as the lack of access to justice, often perpetuates the marginalization of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples should not only be consulted, but also be able to express their consent or non-consent over industrial, infrastructural and extractive projects. In addition, corporations should also be held accountable for addressing environmental, health and socio-cultural impacts or jurisdictional issues linked to their projects.

There was general consensus on the urgent need that corporations work with indigenous peoples in a trustful relationship, where the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples is sought and respected. Indigenous peoples need to be included in decision-making and distributions of resource revenues, especially when it concerns their lives and how they will be affected today and for future generations. On-line participants pointed at the need to conceive free, prior and informed consent not as a one-time yes or no vote, but as an ongoing, interactive process, whereby indigenous peoples establish the rules of investment within their territories, and select and invite corporations they want to partner with in developing their land and resources. The process should start from the earliest stages of project conception and design. Doing so would allow the knowledge of indigenous peoples to be utilized in the development process. This would entail a shift from indigenous peoples reacting to plans developed by corporations and governments, to indigenous peoples taking the lead in planning, managing and monitoring economic development, and having the right to say “no”. This, in turn, would maximize the achievement of an equitable distribution of economic activity and revenues. Education about free, prior and informed consent and the development of clear guidelines for implementation and monitoring are of key importance. Numerous examples were provided of the failure of the global market economy and State structures to recognize and capture the value and importance of indigenous peoples’ traditional economic activities and systems of collective ownership, which often times are part of the informal economy. This has impaired indigenous peoples’ ability to obtain credit from national financial institutions and from global banks, further limiting their possibilities of finding ways out of poverty.

‘Partnerships could increase the capacity of indigenous peoples to engage in local and national planning processes, including at city and national level and in regional and global policy advocacy.’ Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Peoples’ Issues. There was unanimous agreement that many indigenous peoples live in contexts that are still challenged by militarization, human rights violations, broad impunity, atrocity and armed conflict, where implementation of the UN Declaration is unlikely, unless stronger international commitment is reached. Stronger engagement between indigenous leaders and States is required in order to allow the UN Declaration to be a powerful tool for opening up critical realities and truths about spatial, social, gender, inter-tribal, inter-ethnic, inter-cultural, and inter-economic-political inequalities.
Recommendations and conclusion

While many issues were covered during the three-week long discussions, some areas dominated the discourse. From inputs received, the following recommendations can be identified for the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

The implementation of a human rights-based approach to development should take into account issues of equality and sustainability, and endorse the fundamental concept of development with culture and identity.

The UN system should reach out and engage in partnerships with indigenous peoples to ensure their effective participation in the post-2015 development agenda and any emerging sustainable development goals. The inputs should be guided by the principles of equality and non-discrimination and include voices from indigenous women, youth and children and persons with disabilities.

The post-2015 development agenda process is a unique opportunity to ensure indigenous peoples’ participation, whereby the partnership between United Nations and indigenous peoples’ organizations should be further strengthened. The creation of networks among indigenous peoples should be encouraged and supported.

Such partnerships should build on the human rights-based approach to development that is followed by the United Nations. This approach emphasizes universality, equality, participation and accountability. It should also aim to empower indigenous peoples’ institutions, while building on indigenous knowledge practices and systems and strengthening indigenous peoples’ economies and societies.

Partnerships at the international and national levels should increase efforts to support and build on indigenous peoples’ articulation of their own path for development, and should make every effort to provide adequate funding, technical and institutional support and training to assist those development efforts.

At the local and national levels, there is a need to strengthen the institutionalized mechanisms for consultation and participation of indigenous peoples, building on the fundamental principles of free, prior and informed consent and full participation in the development process. The role of the United Nations Country Teams in that respect is crucial. Especially in cities and countries where indigenous peoples have weak institutional capacity, the Country Teams should proactively engage in dialogue with indigenous representatives, both men and women.

The collection of disaggregated data by gender, age, ethnic identity and other factors, e.g. disability, is necessary in order to gain an accurate understanding of indigenous peoples’ poverty, to qualify policies, and to develop appropriate programmes and monitor impact on all members of indigenous communities.

Governments, aid agencies and business entities should commit themselves to being held accountable for their actions and policies for indigenous peoples and to ensure that future development policies are aligned with, and do not contradict indigenous peoples civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.

Recognition of indigenous peoples’ collective rights and adoption of culturally-sensitive education and health programs, security through international law and implementing accountability on crimes against humanity is also essential for eradicating poverty.

Elaboration of appropriate indicators should be a key priority for Governments and the UN System, since it is often difficult to monitor the specific conditions of indigenous peoples. In addition, the development of special censuses for indigenous peoples should be considered.

Indigenous peoples’ contribution to the economy through their own systems of economic development should be recognized. Indigenous peoples’ identity, cultures and interests, cultural heritage, practices and traditional knowledge, preserving and respecting non-market approaches must be recognized so that indigenous peoples can be supported in finding solutions for the eradication of poverty.

There is a demand for the full and effective implementation of a human rights based approach to health which encompasses an intercultural and holistic approach to health in public policies to promote and protect the rights of indigenous peoples, including indigenous persons with disabilities. Similarly, educational policies should affirm and protect language and cultural diversity.
Governments are called upon to engage indigenous peoples in policy and decision-making processes to promote transparency in the management of public affairs and the equitable redistribution of resources and wealth within national societies. In addition, truth and reconciliation commissions could play a decisive role in bringing peace and dialogue within societies which have been in conflict.

Meaningful participation of indigenous peoples should be implemented in all political, juridical, economic, social and cultural decisions that affect them. The specific needs and solutions advanced by communities and by indigenous women in particular, should be taken into account. Participation should take place via the recognition of indigenous representatives and organizations, through adequate funding, and with involvement of indigenous women. The various forms of organization for indigenous peoples should be duly considered as forms of political interaction.

States are called upon to fully implement and uphold the UN Declaration, including Article 29 on indigenous peoples' right to the protection of their environments and the State obligation to ensure free, prior and informed consent regarding hazardous materials. States should also fully implement Articles 23 and 24 affirming the collective right to health and use of traditional medicines.

There must be implementation of culturally relevant and gender-based analysis in all impact statements regarding mining and other extractive industries. Also, there is a need to encourage the right to free, prior and informed consent.

In addition, States, UN agencies and indigenous peoples internal processes must respect the traditional knowledge of indigenous women regarding sustainable development, environmental protection, cultural practices, food production and health. There is also a need to include indigenous women’s full and effective participation as leaders and experts in all levels of decision-making on these matters.

*The discussions were moderated by Ms Mirna Cunningham Kain, member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; Ms Nilla Bernardi, Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; Ms Bethany Donithorn, UNICEF; Mr Roberto Mukaro Borrero, Chair of the NGO Committee on the UN International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, United States; United Confederation of Taino People, Caribbean; Ms Debra Harry, Executive Director, Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism, United States; Ms Malia Nobrega-Olivera, Pacific Board Member, Indigenous ICT Task Force (IITF) & President, Waikiki Hawaiian Civic Club, United States; Ms Andrea Carmen, Executive Director, International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), United States; Mr Ghazali Ohorella, Front Siwa-Lima, International representative for Maluku and the Pacific representative to the GCG for the WCIP 2014; Ms Silvia Dali Angel, Alliance of Indigenous Women of Central America and Mexico.

\(1\) At the time of writing, 2,697 people had signed up to the Addressing Inequalities site, 102 comments were posted on the gender equality discussion

\(2\) Note: Brackets indicate where a change or insertion was made within a quote.