

Declaration of the Space of Collective Rights of Stateless Peoples and Nations for the 2009 World Social Forum Belém

International
2009



Cataloguing data

Title (English-Original language)

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Date and place

1 February 2009, Belém

Region(s)

International

Language(s)

English

Type of document

Policy proposal

Reference Code

INT0001

Keywords

Collective rights, stateless nations

Context

The fact that the 2009 World Social Forum takes place in Belém, the home city for so many indigenous peoples and a city that has witnessed their successful struggle for freedom after centuries of oppression encourages us to establish a network of peoples and nations that are deprived of their collective rights, so that together, and more effectively than in the past, we may open up new pathways towards another possible world.

Abstract

Respect for the collective rights of peoples: one of the cornerstones of another possible world.

We, the undersigned, are delighted that so many individuals and organizations attending the 2009 World Social Forum in Belém have included the collective rights of peoples on their agenda as a topic for discussion and debate. We are particularly pleased that so many participants consider the collective dimension of human rights to be of primary importance and an absolutely essential part of building another possible world. Given that collective rights have not been at the forefront of previous World Social Forums and that they have been considered a marginal issue of limited interest that lacks a realistic political basis, this demonstration of support is nothing short of remarkable.

After much reflection and debate we have come to the conclusion that the main reason behind negative attitudes towards collective rights is a widespread belief, fostered by a certain brand of liberalism, that human rights do nothing more than ground and justify the individualism on which democracy must of necessity be based. Large international organizations, such as the UN, may have emphasized the need to promote social, economic and cultural collective rights, inviting all member-states to guarantee respect for such rights by signing appropriate treaties. But in practice the vast majority of state governments that have paid any attention to the UN's proposals adopt a narrow definition of collective rights or interpret collective rights as they see fit in order to justify existing power structures. This belittlement of collective rights manifests itself in particular in biased theorizations of the most basic collective right of all, the right to self-determination. As a result, the right of innumerable peoples across the globe to self-determination remains unrecognized and many peoples are not considered distinct groups by their constituent states and as such are not even governed by existing collective rights.

Despite these obstacles, some peoples, generally after lengthy campaigns rarely judged in a positive light by many sectors of society, have gained just recognition for their collective rights and as a result have been able to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination. Nevertheless, a large cross-section of global society, and countries considered to be progressive are no exception, is still reticent about a universal application of collective rights and the unrestricted right to self-determination in particular, which would constitute a crucial step towards democracy and lasting peace among peoples.

These are the realities that have been examined in the course of the Forum from the perspective of globalization, a phenomenon which is forcing us to rethink our way of life on a planet shared by humanity as a whole; a way of life which, insofar as it has been grounded on individualism, has been at odds with the respect we need to pay to the planet and its resources if we wish all humanity to live a dignified existence.

In order to promote respect for the planet, which must be considered one of our most urgent priorities for action given the current levels of degradation of both human rights and the environment, the participants in the World Social Forum wish to assert that so-called indigenous or native peoples can play a vital role as our guides. This conclusion has been reached thanks in part to the fact that this year's Forum has been held in the Brazilian city of Belém, the

gateway to Amazonia, a vast natural habitat and the collective home for several indigenous peoples. More than anyone else, these peoples are an example to us all in terms of their complete and unbending respect for the natural world, for their own identity as distinct peoples despite the constant massacres and discrimination they have faced over the years, and for collective rights insofar as they are considered to be fundamental to an equitable understanding and implementation of individual rights. Fittingly, the universal relevance of their persistent struggle to gain respect for their collective rights has been recognized by top international bodies, as demonstrated by the “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”, approved by the UN on September 13, 2007. Among other things, the Declaration states that indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples and that they therefore have the right to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such; that indigenous peoples have the right to control development affecting them and their lands, their languages and cultures and their economic and social progress; that indigenous peoples need to be able to combine the demilitarization of their territories with sustainable exploitation of their resources and have the ability to enter freely into amicable relations among the nations and peoples of the world. These values provide the framework for the great benefit that indigenous peoples believe they have drawn by becoming aware of the need to interpret collective rights as indispensable for their existence, well-being and progress. In light of collective rights, indigenous peoples have won a key victory that enables them to maintain, with a sense of things returning to normal, that their right to self-determination and their right to exercise it in conformity to international law has been recognized.

The participants in the Belém World Social Forum, in addition to demonstrating solidarity with the victories indigenous peoples have won in terms of their collective rights, would like to emphasize the fact that their contributions are also instructive for numerous other peoples around the world that are marginalized to a greater or lesser degree. It is at once an opportunity and a reason to be hopeful for peoples whose existence remains officially unacknowledged and for peoples who are labelled minorities. Their designation as such often has very little to do with the size of the community and a lot to do with arbitrary categories used to render acceptable the unfair division of humanity into majorities (or dominant groups) and minorities (or dominated groups).

Moreover, the participants in the World Social Forum find, in the abovementioned contributions made by indigenous peoples, the “Universal Declaration of the Collective Rights of Peoples”, drafted and signed in the Catalan city of Barcelona in 1990 by individuals and civil organizations from all five continents. This document outlines and defines all of the collective rights that constitute ‘peoples’ and the juridical subjects of these rights: communities that identify with these definitions need to be able to define themselves as distinct peoples and, as a result, other peoples and relevant international bodies, if they want to be coherent, need to recognize them as such. As long as states, are the ones who decide whether a community is a people or not, the outcome will always be unjust and cause conflict. The only thing asked of states and other institutions, which have often acted to the disadvantage of peoples, is that

they allow peoples to reclaim a space of their own. In addition, the Declaration reminds us that no person can exercise his or her individual rights fully unless the community with which he or she identifies is properly recognized. In other words, individual rights are always diminished if the collective linguistic and cultural rights of a given person's community as well as that community's right to self-determination are not respected. Dialectically, collective rights may be said to protect individual rights.

Indeed, the universal application of the collective rights of peoples, and particularly those many peoples who are still forced to press for their rights to be respected and who – paradoxically – face persecution for doing so, requires radical changes to existing power structures, which are not grounded on these ideas. The policies required to implement these changes need to be centred on the principle that simply by defending human rights, both collective and individual, unconditionally and unreservedly, it is possible to build democracy and a peaceful and sustainable existence for all. Otherwise, relations between individuals and peoples will continue to be subject to selfish interests that generate, in the short- or long-term, conflict and discrimination which in turn breed hostility and even violence. Wars between states may end with victories and defeats, but they never result in peace between peoples. Dialogue and negotiation that enable collective and individual rights to be exercised everywhere, on the other hand, can result in a peaceful existence for all, however much established structures of power are in need of change.

The fact that the 2009 World Social Forum takes place in Belém, the home city for so many indigenous peoples and a city that has witnessed their successful struggle for freedom after centuries of oppression encourages us to establish a network of peoples and nations that are deprived of their collective rights, so that together, and more effectively than in the past, we may open up new pathways towards another possible world.

We, the undersigned, hope that the energy and enthusiasm behind this manifesto will be channelled into promoting the abovementioned network and that collective rights, from a variety of perspectives and as a means of promoting a form of globalization that liberates humanity, are firmly on the agenda at the next World Social Forum.

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