

Conference proceedings

Qamiri: What lessons can be learnt from indigenous peoples?

Francesca Chianese

Sapienza Università di Roma

francescachianese@hotmail.com

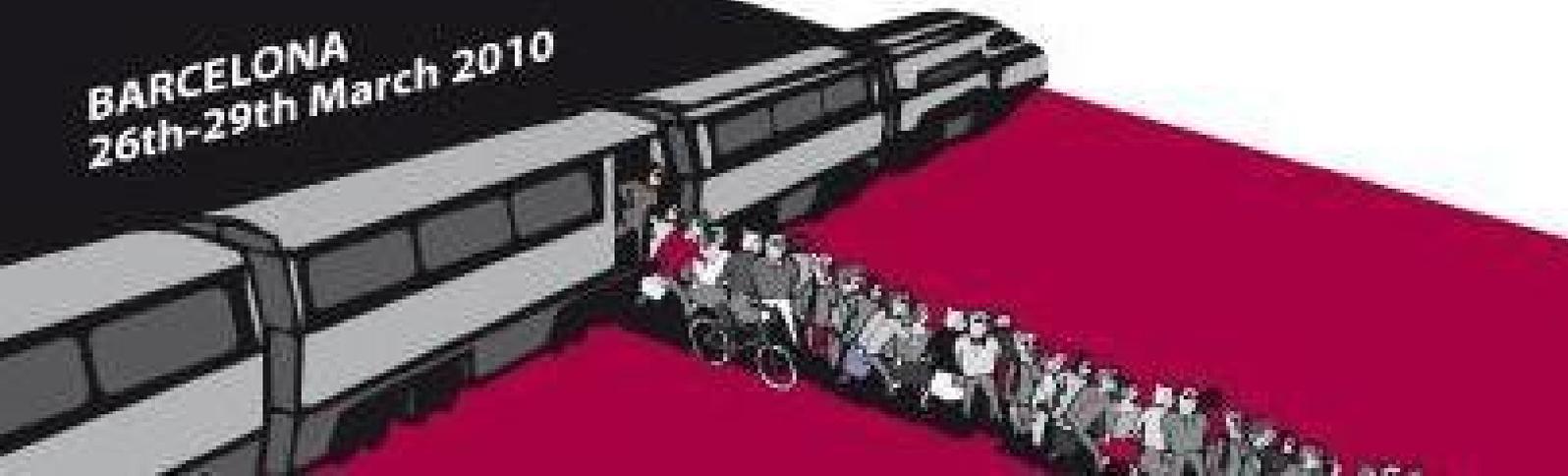
Jampel Dell'Angelo

CIRPS-Sapienza Università di Roma

jampel.dellangelo@uniroma1.it

**2nd Conference
on Economic
Degrowth
For Ecological Sustainability
and Social Equity**

**BARCELONA
26th-29th March 2010**



Abstract

The aim of this paper is not to lecture the “decadent western world” on the lessons it can learn from indigenous peoples. Whilst avoiding the mystification of the “bon sauvage” this paper acknowledges the centrality of nature in indigenous peoples’ worldview. Contrary to the dominant western perspective and way of living, indigenous peoples’ perspective of societies’ well-being is based on equilibrium and harmony – based on the values of reciprocity, diversity, solidarity, accountability and harmony with Mother Earth.. They deploy an integral, multi-dimensional system of values and practices, which derive from a traditional, community-wide, and ritually-sanctioned way of life based on a substantial body of indigenous knowledge which relates the people to the land, forest and wildlife, as well as to the spiritual world. The term “voluntary simplicity” that often recurs in the literature on degrowth can be applied as a consequence of a rise in self-awareness. This paper argues that indigenous peoples’ worldview, knowledge, values and perspectives are a global heritage which can serve as a pool to improve relations between mankind and nature and find a positive diffusion and enrich the debate in the degrowth community.

The second focus of the paper is related to indigenous peoples’ development of resource management and ecological awareness in a context of struggle, resistance, injustice, and vulnerability. For example the environmental crisis leads to environmental discrimination towards indigenous peoples who are the worst affected by climate change and are expected to carry the heaviest burden of adjustment while leaving the smallest ecological footprint. Due to their relation with the land and the environment, any change in the ecosystem adversely impacts their traditional livelihoods, their knowledge and their control over the lands, territories and resources. The issues that surround climate change and indigenous peoples are therefore issues of equity, social justice, ecological sustainability, environmental justice and human rights. Despite world crisis and the worsening environmental conditions not only do traditional livelihoods still exist but indigenous knowledge and management systems have been revive demonstrating effective adaptation and adjustment strategies.

Keywords

indigenous peoples, Buen Vivir, ecological justice, sustainability

1 Introduction

The main point of this paper is to acknowledge that the *degrowth movement* shares with the *indigenous peoples movement* a similar critique of the development and economic-growth paradigms. The degrowth movement could learn a great deal from indigenous peoples' perspectives on the relationship between man and nature. Moreover indigenous peoples have developed a long experience of resistance and alternatives to the capitalistic dynamics of natural resources exploitation that are interesting for the degrowth debates. Finding common points between the *degrowth* ideas and indigenous peoples perspectives could represent a mutual fortification and reinforce their alliance in the critique to the dominant development and economic growth model.

This paper first looks at what are the perspectives of indigenous peoples on development, pointing out that indigenous peoples are victims of environmental injustice and that often they are not only carrying the burden of the environmental deterioration caused by capitalistic exploitation of natural resources but they are also affected by the solutions proposed to reverse the negative impacts of the environmental crisis. The paper then continues describing synthetically some of the practices and traditional livelihood systems that lead to effective adaptation and coping strategies in a context of climate change and environmental degradation. In the second part the paper emphasizes indigenous peoples' interpretation of the expansion of the main development pro economic growth model as a threat to their way of living. The paper continues introducing the concept of "Qamiri" and "Buen Vivir" with a particular reference to the case of Bolivia. Then it is stressed the importance of indigenous peoples participation as a key force for sustainability. Finally in the conclusive remarks, the common points between the degrowth movement and indigenous peoples' perspectives are identified and the importance of a major role and participation of indigenous peoples in the governance of environment and development in the global south is stressed.

2 Indigenous peoples' perspective on development

Indigenous peoples consider that economic liberalism, as the driver of development, is the product of a particular worldview, the worldview of the dominant society. As a consequence, its implementation often reflects the culture and values of the dominant society, which result in inequity and injustice and the destruction of the diverse livelihood systems of indigenous peoples. Therefore, the current development paradigm is seen to be a problem rather than a solution for many indigenous peoples who question the usefulness of the term "development", which is a term not often used within indigenous peoples' societies and that has not contributed to improving their lives (United Nations 2010).

The dominant development model has failed mostly due to unsustainable consumption and production patterns of the rich countries and the elite within the poor countries. The unsustainability of the current path of globalized development leads to environmental injustice; this mechanism place the heaviest burden on some strata of the population, namely the most vulnerable and disempowered; amongst them indigenous and tribal peoples.

Thus it is that development often results in the overexploitation of natural resources where indigenous peoples, their cultures and identities are seen as "obstacles" to

progress because their lands and territories are rich in resources and indigenous peoples are not willing to freely dispose of them. Following the same line of thoughts, indigenous peoples' cultures and values are seen to be contradictory to the values of the market economy, such as the accumulation of profit, hyper-consumption and competitiveness (United Nations 2010).

2.1 Development effects on Indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples disproportionately suffer from the serious impacts of the development paradigm and the consequences of climate change on their territories because they are mainly dependent on the integrity of their ecosystems for their survival. Being indigenous peoples, peoples of the land and ecosystems any change in the ecosystem adversely impacts their traditional livelihoods, their knowledge and their control over their lands, territories and resources. Indigenous peoples are affected by climate change and other environmental crisis in multiple ways depending on the area they inhabit and base their livelihood upon: from diminishing sea ice and shifting animal migration routes in the Arctic, to increased fires in tropical rainforests and reductions in rainfall in temperate ecosystems, to intensified threats to water and food security, increased coastal erosion and forced evictions of communities from their traditional territories (IWGIA 2008)

The consequences of the dominant paradigm can be seen all over the world and are causing indigenous peoples' impoverishment, the loss of their traditional way of life and the loss of their culture. Overall, this process has deteriorating consequences for indigenous peoples (being them pastoralists, hunters and gatherers or shifting agriculturalists). It has weakened past survival systems, and has accentuated poverty and natural resources degradation which resulted in loss of food security, the deteriorating quality of nutrition, the loss of plant diversity and, the erosion of ceremonial life, reduction or dissolution of communal labour exchange and cooperation, privatization of land ownership and individualization of production, increased socio-economic inequality, increasing conflicts, and general erosion of social cohesion and communal identity (Corpuz 2008).

In many instances indigenous peoples are also affected by climate mitigation measures because these fail to respect their rights and fail to recognize that indigenous peoples are the ones who mainly bear the costs of adapting to climate change. Some mitigation measures, such as emissions trading, carbon sinks, renewable energy systems, and alternative fuels, have resulted in the further exclusion of indigenous peoples and in the violation of their human rights (United Nations 2010). As Victoria Tauli Corpuz, former Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, put it at the CBD 9th Conference of Parties (Tauli Corpuz 2008):

“What adds insult to injury is that, indigenous peoples do not only suffer from climate change impacts but also from the effects of climate change mitigation measures which are mainly market-based mechanisms. The establishment of carbon sinks, emissions trading, the expansion of bio-fuel plantations, the building of more mega-hydroelectric dams and geothermal dams, which are considered renewable energy sources, are now having disastrous impacts for indigenous peoples. These include, massive land grabs of indigenous lands, displacement from their traditional territories, erosion of their biodiversity and traditional knowledge, undermining of cultural diversity and the destruction of their traditional livelihoods. [As a consequence] we now see a phenomenon called environmental refugees, many of which are indigenous peoples”.

2.2 Indigenous responses

Reversely from the dominant perspective and way of living, indigenous peoples' perspective of healthy societies is based on equilibrium and harmony whose foundations are values of reciprocity, diversity, solidarity, harmony with Mother Earth, and accountability. They deploy an integral, multi-dimensional system of values and practices, which stems from a traditional, community-wide, and ritually-sanctioned way of life based on a substantial body of indigenous knowledge relating the people to the land, forest and wildlife, and the spiritual world.

Despite world crisis and the worsening conditions in terms of environmental degradation, we are testimonies of a persistence of traditional livelihoods and the revitalization of indigenous knowledge and management systems that lead to effective adaptation and coping strategies. "Indigenous peoples have demonstrated their resilience and their capacity to adapt to changes happening in their communities and they have accumulated substantial experiences and knowledge in this process" (Tauli Corpuz 2008).

Many examples of sustainable use of resources can be extracted from indigenous peoples practices, among them, the "rotational farming [which] is still widely practiced among many indigenous groups and [...] has proven to be ecologically sustainable, provided that enough land is available for indigenous peoples engaged in this type of livelihood [...] shifting cultivators are flexible, they change and diversify, have complex land-use and management systems whose economic basis rests on several pillars" (Corpuz 2008).

Additionally, indigenous small-scale agriculturists who live in harsh and fragile ecosystems practice multiple cropping and hardly use any chemical inputs in their farms. Green manure, crop rotation, composting, fallow periods and agroforestry increase the production of biomass and enhance soil fertility and organic matter content. Thus, the capacity of soil to sequester carbon is further increased (Asia Summit CCIP 2009). Further, this system takes existing knowledge and experience as point of departure, taps potential for exchange, and fosters a belief in one's own creativity (Corpuz 2008).

For what concerns pastoralism, it is important to highlight that "the rich biodiversity that characterizes many rangelands is often the result of pastoral management patterns, which is directly linked to the critical reliance of herding systems on the natural resource base and its sustainable regenerative capacities. This ecological wealth has often been created and maintained by pastoralists" (Davis and Nori 2008, p:134).

3 Well - being as a response to the dominant paradigm

As a result of the above mentioned consequences of the dominant development paradigm, mainstream development is regarded as one of the root causes of indigenous peoples' problems and indigenous peoples have thus described the prevailing development paradigm as development aggression (Carino 2005) and have defined the dominant development framework as being the cause of poverty for most indigenous peoples (Tauli Corpuz 2005). The dominant development model or paradigm (i.e. the incessant pursuit of economic growth without the integration of cultural development, social justice and environmental sustainability) has failed and there is the need for a holistic view of development, a view that gives rise to an integrated response to multifaceted development problems (Corpuz 2008).

Indigenous peoples' poverty is understood by many governments and developmental

agencies and organizations in terms of material deprivation; in contrast, indigenous peoples understand it in terms of powerlessness and vulnerability linked to: systemic discrimination, social and ecological inequalities and injustice, processes of impoverishment caused by dispossession of their ancestral lands, loss of control over their natural resources and indigenous knowledge, forced assimilation into the mainstream society and integration in the market economy, exclusion and lack of access to decision-making at all levels. “Governments speak of ‘poverty’ while Indigenous Peoples speak of ‘rights’” (Carino 2005).

Additionally, the concept of development itself, which is defined by progress and economic accumulation and growth, is an alien concept for indigenous peoples whose languages do not have a parallel concept. Indigenous peoples use the concept of well-being or well-living¹. Indigenous peoples’ interpretations of well-being have a number of common elements throughout the world. Among them: the importance of collective economic actors and community economic institutions, the integrity of indigenous governance, a perspective of production which gives importance to the improvement of the quality of life rather than the rise in profit, the interaction between people, resources and the spiritual aspects of life, the harmony between human beings and Mother Earth (United Nations 2010).

Example of this conception of living in harmony with the environment can be found all over the world. In South America, for example, many indigenous peoples developed the concept of “*vida armonica*” or “*buen vivir*”. For them, what physically allows soil, water and life to regenerate is that very knowledge— linking past, present and future— and people’s respect of the customary norms. Society must be egalitarian, based on reciprocity and solidarity and in a continuous dialogue with the environment (CEESP 2008).

Likewise, in Asia indigenous peoples’ agro-ecosystems are the basis for the diverse cultures of indigenous peoples and many high mountain production systems are systems that have significant components based on spirituality. “Reciprocity and a strong sense of community are vital for the sustenance of this production system. Production is intensive and small-scale and therefore has advantage for the family and also for the soil” (Corpuz 2008).

3.1 Bolivia, the Qamiri and the *Buen Vivir*

The pluri-national state of Bolivia is building an alternative model to the western paradigm of development. The Bolivian government is seeking the *Pachacuti* (the return to equilibrium with nature and Mother Earth) through the implementation of the concept of ‘*Buen Vivir*’, which is put into practice through the Qamiri (peoples who live well, in harmony with nature). Great emphasis is put on the challenge of de-colonizing the institutions of the State as well as peoples’ minds and ideologies in order to enable the construction of the State’s new foundations rooted in the indigenous cosmovision and the traditional concept of living in accordance with the rules and laws of a harmony with nature and Mother Earth.

¹ “It is represented in notions such as the Quechua *sumaj kausay* (*sumaj* , beautiful, good; *kausay* , to live); the Maya *utzil* (*utz*, well being; *il*, well living); or the Tule *naskue* (*napguana* , mother earth, well-being; *kue*, to look forward)” Altarelli, Vanda assisted by Viviana Sacco “Desk Review of IFAD PL Portfolio Related to Indigenous Peoples”, p 10.

The *Buen Vivir* or *Vivir Bien* means a strengthen of territorial rights, the revitalization of indigenous governance systems, the return to an harmonious natural resources' use and management, and the revitalization of indigenous culture, identity and language. The rebuilding of the State's foundation are done through the combination of traditional and modern techniques and through the recognition of the fact that Mother Earth cannot claim her rights, therefore, there is the need for the enforcement of State's obligation towards Mother Earth.

The Bolivian example shows the need to consider the restructuring of models and paradigms as a dynamic process of conscious selections from traditional repertoires. This is due to the fact that, "throughout the world the governance systems of contemporary indigenous [...] are syncretic constructions of old and new knowledge, practices, tools and values of different cultural origin. Such puzzles [...] are communities' attempts to cope with new environmental conditions, market requirements, and tenure regulations imposed by the state" (CEESP 2008: 3).

Another point to bear in mind when dealing with the concept of the *Buen Vivir* is the interconnected nature of indigenous peoples' and Mother Earth's rights which cannot be sought separately. We want to stress this point because, even in the progressive processes of State reformulation that Bolivia is experiencing, there is room for contradiction and misuse of the idea of Mother Earth's rights. The President himself spoke of the ending of the human rights era and the opening of the Mother Earth's rights era, which is seen with great concern by indigenous peoples whose rights are not recognized by many States around the world.

What is important to highlight here is the fact that indigenous' worldviews and the consequent practices, can be, and should be used as models for a more balanced, equitable and effectively sustainable relation with the environment.

4 Indigenous peoples' participation as a key to sustainability

Even though indigenous peoples have been able to cope with environmental crisis and climate change they are still weak in the face of governmental and international programmes and policies. "The main barrier to indigenous peoples' coping and adaptation capacities is first and foremost the lack of recognition and promotion of their human rights. [...] Another barrier is the lack of involvement of indigenous peoples in decision making processes as well as design and implementation of initiatives to address climate change at the national, regional and international level" (IWGIA 2008).

To understand indigenous peoples' cosmovisions and livelihood systems, and to enhance them, there is the need to guarantee indigenous peoples' participation and their right of self - determination. Indigenous peoples' demand for self-determination and autonomy guarantees social, political and economic rights. These include: access and control over their resources, respect for their collective rights and cultural distinctiveness, decision regarding their political life and a more equal participation in the national arena (Stavenhagen 2002). Self-determination works as a guarantee of equal rights based on the recognition of the differences between the individual groups, which make up the citizenship and is characterized by a holistic approach that seeks to build on collective rights, security and greater control and self- governance of lands, territories and resources; it builds on tradition with respect for ancestors, but also looks forward (United Nations 2010). Autonomy and self-determination are "attempts to gain political and

economic protection and control [as much as] rights to cultural integrity and difference” (Muehelbach 2003: 243).

Indigenous peoples also seek free, prior and informed consent in relation to process and decisions that may affect them. The principle of free, prior and informed consent² is not simply a procedure but a right associated with the right of self-determination of indigenous peoples; the right of participation in agreements, consultations and decision-making processes with States and private entities; in relation to access to natural resources including biological resources, genetic resources and/or traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples, leading to possible exploration, development or use thereof; in relation to treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements between States and indigenous peoples, tribes and nations; in relation to, extractive industries, conservation, hydro-development, other developments and tourism activities in indigenous areas; in relation to policies and legislation dealing with or affecting indigenous peoples.

² Defined by the report of the International Workshop on Methodologies regarding Free, Prior and Informed Consent and Indigenous Peoples, as:

Free should imply no coercion, intimidation or manipulation;

Prior should imply consent has been sought sufficiently in advance of any authorization or commencement of activities and respect time requirements of indigenous consultation/consensus processes;

Informed – should imply that information is provided that covers (at least) the following aspects:

- a. The nature, size, pace, reversibility and scope of any proposed project or activity;
- b. The reason/s or purpose of the project and/or activity;
- c. The duration of the above;
- d. The locality of areas that will be affected;
- e. A preliminary assessment of the likely economic, social, cultural and environmental impact, including potential risks and fair and equitable benefit sharing in a context that respects the precautionary principle;
- f. Personnel likely to be involved in the execution of the proposed project
- g. Procedures that the project may entail.

Consent

Consultation and participation are crucial components of a consent process. Consultation should be undertaken in good faith. The parties should establish a dialogue allowing them to find appropriate solutions in an atmosphere of mutual respect in good faith, and full and equitable participation. Consultation requires time and an effective system for communicating among interest holders. Indigenous peoples should be able to participate through their own freely chosen representatives and customary or other institutions. The inclusion of a gender perspective and the participation of indigenous women is essential, as well as participation of children and youth as appropriate. This process may include the option of withholding consent.

Consent to any agreement should be interpreted as indigenous peoples have reasonably understood it.

5 Conclusive discussion

This paper has focused on the main aspects of the dialectic between the main development capitalistic paradigm and indigenous peoples' perspectives. This dialectic is important for the Degrowth movement because it has some fundamental points in common:

First of all Degrowth and Indigenous Peoples' perspectives both identify in the current economic mainstream growth oriented mode of production the cause of environmental degradation, contamination and natural resources exhaustion. Second, Degrowth and Indigenous Peoples' perspectives do not recognize economic growth as source of happiness and wellbeing and "well-living". Third, Degrowth and Indigenous Peoples' perspectives point out at the fact that global economic growth and mainstream development projects fail to tackle poverty and, in the case of indigenous peoples, produce impoverishment. Fourth, both perspectives point out at the relationship between capitalistic market expansion and lack of human rights' respect, absence of active participation of the citizens in the decision making process, and cultural diversity loss. Fifth, Degrowth and Indigenous Peoples' perspectives share the idea of the central importance of a harmonious relationship between man and nature. Moreover, both perspectives seek practical and lifestyle alternatives to the mainstream narratives. Lastly, Degrowth and Indigenous Peoples' perspectives have to strengthen their recognition in the mainstream scientific community and in the international development and governance arenas.

To talk about indigenous peoples' management of the environment in which they live is not new either in the academy or in the development arena, because "in an age of ecological disaster and emerging models of sustainable development, the concepts of biological and cultural diversity [...] have powerfully come to the fore" (Muehelebach 2001, p: 418-419). Therefore, due to the widespread (global) fear of environmental disaster, the knowledge of indigenous peoples has become a precious resource and their "way of being" highly esteemed. From the perspective of those developmental agencies concerned with the environment, indigenous people become 'ecologically noble savage' (Redford 1991).

But the aim of this article was not to propose an image of indigenous peoples as modern noble savage. The main point of this contribution is not a romanticized parallelism between the indigenous lifestyle and degrowth's call for a voluntary simplicity, neither a proclamation of the necessity to the "return to the good old village". The main point is acknowledging that the *degrowth movement* shares with the *indigenous peoples movement* a critique of the development economic-growth paradigm. The hierarchy of the values in the indigenous worldviews are much closer to the degrowth rather than to the capitalistic development paradigm. Finding common grounds between the *degrowth* and indigenous people represents a mutual fortification and a confirmation that environmental justice represents one of the main forces for Sustainability.

The recognition of the epistemological importance of indigenous peoples' perspectives as an alternative to the main economic and development paradigms has to go along with the strengthening of the role, participation and power of indigenous peoples in the world institutions that rule the common goods and of the environment governance. Climate change has heightened the urgency to alter the dominant development model not only for the sake of indigenous peoples, but for the whole of humanity and the planet and in this scenario indigenous peoples are key players for the creation of a sustainable world

(United Nations 2010). Learning from indigenous peoples' mitigation and adaptation strategies and their traditional environmental management and resource use, meanwhile, strengthening the cultural identity of indigenous peoples linked to natural resource management and conservation, securing their rights, ensuring legislative and policy backing, and supporting agency and communities capacities, are urgently needed strategies which would let us all move toward environmental justice and better governance systems.

References

- Asia Summit on Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples Report 2009
- Cariño, J., 2005. Indigenous Peoples, Human Rights and Poverty Indigenous Perspectives, Volume 7, Number 1, Tebtebba Foundation.
- CEESP 2008. Recognising and supporting indigenous & community conservation— ideas & experiences from the grassroots / CEESP briefing note 9.
- Corpuz, J., 2008. Report of the Consultation Workshop and Dialogue on Indigenous Peoples' Self-determined Development or Development with Identity, 14-17 March 2008 Tivoli, Italy
- Davis, J. and M., Nori 2008. Managing and Mitigating Climate Change Through Pastoralism. Policy Matters 16, 134-143.
- IWGIA 2008, Conference on Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change Copenhagen, 21 - 22 February 2008 MEETING REPORT Submitted by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) p. 5.
- Muehelebach, A. 2001. Making place at the United Nations: indigenous cultural politics at the U.N. working group on indigenous populations Cultural Anthropology vol 3, 418-9.
- Redford K. H. 1991. The ecologically noble savage Cultural Survival Quarterly, issue 15.1
- Stavenhagen R, 2002. The return of the native: the indigenous challenge in Latin America ILAS Occasional Papers 27.
- Tauli Corpuz, V, 2008. UN permanent forum on indigenous issues statement on biodiversity and climate change (Agenda Item 4.5), CBD 9th Conference of Parties, Bonn, Germany.
- Tauli Corpuz, V, 2005. In Larger Freedom: The Challenge of Partnerships from Indigenous Peoples' Perspectives Presented at the 58th Annual DPI/NGO Conference, United Nations, New York, 7-9 Sept.
- United Nations 2010. Indigenous peoples: development with culture and identity: articles 3 and 32 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Report of the international expert group meeting, 5 February.



www.degrowth.eu