Indigenous Peoples’ Partnership with UN Continues to Evolve

BAGUIO CITY, Philippines/New York, September 19—Time was when indigenous peoples’ representatives and activists were practically just at peripheries of, not inside, the United Nations’ headquarters. But thanks to their own true grit over the years, indigenous peoples had persistently lobbied hard for mechanisms and spaces within the UN system, which, after almost three decades, finally brought results in their favor.
Now indigenous peoples are no longer outsiders. They can now “have the floor” inside the UN halls, with even some of them in the podium, chairing or moderating important international sessions.

“Since the turn of the millennium, the UN System has made progress to strengthen its attention and support to indigenous peoples,” said a new report coordinated and edited by Birgitte Feiring, a Copenhagen-based indigenous peoples’ rights and governance expert.

The new report said the “most visible institutional and normative breakthroughs” were the establishment of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in 2000, the appointment of UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples starting 2001 and the establishment of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) in 2007.

Indigenous peoples worldwide also saw as a “historic milestone” the adoption in 2007 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). But it took 25 years or a quarter of a lifetime of relentless lobbying before the UNDRIP was finally adopted, say indigenous peoples’ activists and lobbyists.

All these recent milestones and developments “confirm the relevance and importance of indigenous issues to the core purposes of the United Nations,” said the report.

These developments also provide the UN system with a “common normative framework and specialized mechanisms to promote implementation, within Member-States and the UN system itself,” the report added.

Commissioned by the Philippine-based indigenous institution Tebtebba (Indigenous Peoples’ International Centre for Policy Research and Education) and the Chiang Mai, Thailand-based Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact or AIPP, the report will be launched September 24 in New York following the September 22-23 World Conference on Indigenous Peoples or WCIP.

The new report, which will be published later as a book, is entitled, “United Nations and Indigenous Peoples in Developing Countries: An Evolving Partnership.”

The report will be simultaneously launched with a new book entitled, “Indigenous Peoples and the Extractive Sector: Towards a Rights-Respecting Engagement,” which was co-published by Tebtebba, the London-based Philippine Indigenous Links (PIPLinks), and the Middlesex University of London. The event will also launch the International Land and Forest Tenure Facility.

The report reviewed four agencies, which are central to indigenous peoples’ issues, given their mandate and focus. These include the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), International Labour Organization (ILO),
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the UN Development Program (UNDP).

The UNDRIP so far has helped a great deal not only in requiring the UN system in promoting indigenous peoples’ rights but also in mobilizing financial cooperation and technical assistance, factoring in the specific situation of indigenous peoples throughout its diverse agencies, funds and programs, said the report.

The report also cited the UNPFII for its “catalytic role in furthering the mainstreaming of indigenous peoples’ rights” within the UN system, and its role as “a global clearing house” and consultation mechanism for information, knowledge and resources.

“However, the potential of using the UNFII recommendations as a roadmap for addressing indigenous peoples’ issues within the UN system is challenged by difficulties in systematically monitoring recommendations,” said the report. And there are agencies that do not regularly report to the Forum, it added.

The report also cited the “enormous importance” of the Special Rapporteur’s communications and reports “as they carry the authority and legitimacy given to the mandate by the Human Rights Council.”

The country reports of the Rapporteur provide an in-depth analysis of the situation of indigenous peoples as well as recommendations so their rights could be fulfilled.

The report cited various examples where UN Country Teams or agencies have specifically used the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur to guide their work.

In Cambodia, UN agencies collaborated with indigenous communities in implementing legislation and policies concerning titling of indigenous peoples’ communal lands.

In Orissa, India, an IFAD project is helping secure land titles for 30,000 landless people and so far about 15,000 land titles have been secured in some 450 villages.

Another similar IFAD project helped indigenous peoples in Northern Mindanao, Philippines secure certificates to their ancestral domains.

In Bangladesh, UNESCO has an ongoing pilot adult literacy program in three districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It also supported a two-month festival on the culture of the Bandarban Hill People.

In Bolivia, the UN Population Fund’s country program is addressing the reproductive health and rights of indigenous women, including how to prevent sexual violence.

In Namibia, UNESCO has supported Early Childhood Development Programs in the Caprivi and Ohangwena Regions since 2003, establishing kindergartens for San children.

These are just among some of the several cases cited in the report highlighting the evolving partnership between the UN system and indigenous peoples.

Feiring and her team said they hoped the report can serve as “catalogue of ideas to inspire both indigenous representatives and UN officials.” (Maurice Malanes/Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service)