

Seminar in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Indigenous Peoples, Custodians of Nature: from Laudato si' of Pope Francesco to the Sustainable Development Goals



The panel was composed of three high level representatives from the Catholic Church, a journalist, a representative from International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) one from World Food Programme (WFP) and one from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the three UN Agencies with their headquarters in Rome.

The Moderator was Mons. V. Conso, from Forum Roma delle ONG di ispirazione cattolica (ONG).

The reason for this Seminar, as well as many other events that are taking place in other countries, is the preparation for the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops which will take place in Rome, from 6 to 27 October 2019.

The subject of the Assembly will be:

“Amazonia, new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology”.

The main objective is to identify new ways of giving spiritual support and assistance to that portion of globe, especially to the indigenous people. They are often forgotten and do not

have a prospect of a serene future. This is due to the crisis within the Amazonian forest. It is the green lung of the world and it is of crucial importance for our planet's survival.

Integral ecology does not only consider nature, but it includes human and social dimension. Everything is connected, nature, human beings, God.

Pope Francis always meets indigenous people during his pastoral trips around the world. During his recent travel to Central America, he met some indigenous people from Amazonia. He felt that today they are more threaten than ever.

In fact, economic interests are concentrated in different areas of the territory, promoting forest devastation, rivers and air contamination, discriminating politics which lead to suicide amongst indigenous people, especially amongst young people.

In Panama, the Pope met hundreds of young indigenous people. He recommended them to return to their original culture and take the responsibility of their roots, because from there, they will get their strength.

In other occasions, Pope Francis expressed his concern in that human beings are not owners of nature, they just manage it. But in spite of centuries of evolution, no progress has been made at this regard.

However, even though the focus is on Amazonia, there are other vast forests in the world, where the native people face the same ecological and social problems. There will be representatives from the Church in all those places at the Synod.

Card. Baldisseri illustrated the various phases of the Assembly, which will conclude with a document from the Pope summarizing the recommendations of the Synod of Bishops.

Silvina Pérez, journalist from L'Osservatore Romano (Vatican newspaper)

She mentioned the period in which Pope Francis was the Archbishop of Argentina. He always defended the poor and appreciated the cultural background of the indigenous people. In fact, he promoted a team for the translation of their holy texts. The publication produced by the team was very interesting and enriching, as it was a great opportunity for the members of the team to find out that indigenous people had a totally different vision of the world.

Silvina Pérez also focused on the importance of keeping alive the indigenous languages, as they express the value of their culture. By request of some indigenous peoples, the Gospel has been translated into their language.

In some countries, indigenous people participate actively in politics, supported by local Church.

The major problem for indigenous people is land expropriation.

Our challenge is to reinforce these people within their own culture, in their own land. We have to avoid their transfer to a metropolis where they cannot integrate. There, they easily get involved in drug trafficking.

Azzurra Chiarini, Coordinator of the project for empowerment of rural women, WFP

The project is based in 7 countries. It focuses mostly on indigenous women, who are discriminated against because of their sex, their origins and their socio-economic status. They normally do not have access to education, to health services, to credit, to employment. Often, they are victims of domestic violence.

By teaching women different techniques, the project promotes:

- sustainable agriculture and food security: local vegetables production and protection of biodiversity;
- income producing activities: handcrafted fabrics and commercialization of vegetables

The project also promotes gender equality and indigenous women's participation in politics.

Indigenous women are often considered vulnerable. They represent, however, generations of knowledge custodians, healers and warriors.

Mattia Prayer-Galletti, Responsible for the Indigenous Programme, IFAD

IFAD has always considered indigenous peoples as a priority objective in fighting rural poverty and supports them through two instruments:

- Financial instrument: indigenous peoples assistance facility, the fund finances projects born and accomplished by indigenous peoples' organizations (350 projects in the world)
- Politic instrument: Forum of indigenous peoples, in which IFAD mediates in the dialogue between governments and indigenous peoples.

In this process, the protagonists are indigenous people, as their full and constant participation is the key. The Forum is held every year a few days before the IFAD's annual Conference, in order to allow delegates from the various governments to participate.

There were 150 delegates from indigenous peoples in the last Forum. The delegate from the UN made a very touching speech regarding the increasing violence against those who defend indigenous peoples' rights and the environment. During 2017, there were 310 documented homicides (and many more not documented).

Indigenous people are the best guardians of our common house (Pope Francis). They safeguard the fragile ecosystems, the forests, mother earth, the water resources. In fact, the areas in which they live, the deforestation is inferior to the rest of the forest. They have a tight relationship with nature; therefore they are those who suffer most from the consequence of climate change.

Yon Fernandez-Larrinoa, Officer Responsible for Indigenous Peoples' Food Security Programme, FAO

The discrimination against indigenous people is still a reality in many countries. It is our responsibility to change that now.

Indigenous people: 400 million people that live in 90 countries of the world in 7 socio-cultural regions, they speak thousands of languages and more important, they have their culture and their ancestral traditions.

The UN and relevant agencies have not given enough importance to indigenous people and they never appear in the agenda of the main Conferences and Councils of the member countries.

Nevertheless, there is a team which has been working from some years in FAO, together with WFP, IFAD and other UN agencies.

They have achieved a number of goals and many documents produced by the UN agencies consider the needs of indigenous people:

- Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples; Voluntary Guidelines for Right to Food, for Land Tenure, for Agricultural Investment, for Indigenous Food Systems; there is a FAO Policy on Indigenous Peoples
- The UN Interagency Conference for Indigenous Peoples was coordinated by FAO and IFAD
- Indigenous Youth Meeting in 2017: the meeting was aimed at encouraging the new generation of indigenous to remain with their communities, value their traditional knowledge and share it.
- The establishment of a permanent Global Forum for Youth Indigenous coordinated by FAO/IFAD/WFP
- Campaign for Indigenous Women, to raise awareness to eliminate barriers that prevent them from fully enjoying their rights and moving towards sustainable development
- A manual for UN project practitioners to include Indigenous Peoples in their work
- Provide support to COP in the area of Indigenous Peoples

The world is looking for secure food systems.

Indigenous Peoples have their own food security systems and they know how to live in harmony with mother earth. Yet, we are risking of losing their spiritual and cultural richness through new economic and ideological colonization disguised as “development”. We need to study and learn from them.

FAO Director General stated that the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and a world without hunger can not be achieved without the indigenous people.