

# Native Peoples and the World Social Forum

Wednesday 20 February 2008, by [TERENA Marcos](#) (Date first published: 26 January 2008).

After 22 years of planning, struggle and hope, and crediting the perseverance of indigenous leaders, last September the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on Indigenous Rights. In spite of numerous obstacles, discrimination, and social alienation, this measure is a clear indication that the spirit of our ancestral communities retains a defence that the conquest was not able to annihilate.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the indigenous voice was not so much that of a grieving and pained victim, but rather began to recover an autonomous value reflecting ethnic and environmental diversity, unrestrained by territorial geopolitics imposed by States.

It is important to recognise that indigenous peoples are able to react independently when dealing with prevailing challenges, such as the Millennium Development Goals set by the UN.

Within civil and organised society, this characteristic has led to an alliance governed by new parameters of human relationships, social harmony and sustainable economic development.

The modern world is becoming increasingly intolerant of the impositions made by the big economic blocks that create both wealth and poverty, or the type of peace imposed by military forces, imitating the barbarians of antiquity.

Indigenous diversity provides an example towards a new world composition of values founded on human rights, by being based on collective, commonly agreed rights. Such an approach undermines unilateral concepts of development and power, through closer adherence to spiritual and environmental aspects, and mutual respect among people and cultures.

The modern world, faced by rapid technological developments, is becoming increasingly aware of the foolishness of following a path stained by corruption, without any visible destiny or future perspectives. The world's great nations and icons have become experts in the production of waste and conflict, threatening the very basis of life itself.

Hence, the dream that another world is possible, and the appearance of a World Social Forum (WSF), which has provided an opportunity for politicians and social movements to discuss issues and points of mutual interest.

For the (world's) indigenous peoples, the plenary meetings of the Forum provide a platform for the traditional knowledge and diverse characteristics of each region, as people raise their voices in support of justice and rights.

And as in North America in the nineteenth century, when the Sioux leader Sitting Bull defeated the US Army, today we can find inspiration in the political conquest achieved by the Aymaras under Evo Morales, elected president of Bolivia by people from all ethnic backgrounds, an achievement of great importance for indigenous peoples everywhere.

Neither should we forget the huge demonstrations organised by indigenous peoples and rural workers prior to this (political) conquest, or experiences such as those of indigenous organisations in Ecuador, who twice deposed a sitting president, but were unable to take power themselves, to the

relief of the established political classes.

Thanks to the above, the WSF, working to create a fairer society, has inserted itself into the major political, social and economic debates now taking place. Today, our new warriors have the appearance of students, intellectuals, rural and social movements, and political parties.

Hence, indigenous peoples, even when treated like victims, show that behind their appearance of poverty, exists the right to take decisions, even if they decide to say no to modernity and its development model.

No indigenous people can exist without an earth that offers a sacred conduit of life and habitat, referred to as the Pacha Mama by the Andean nations, and who the Kuna in Panama called Abi-Ayala. However, even when faced by the moral rights of native peoples, official recognition by governments of their responsibilities is always being put off, leading to social poverty, conflicts, environmental crimes, the imprisonment of leaders, and even the death of the young and elderly.

And in spite of the progress made in Latin America in countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Venezuela, we cannot forget that many indigenous people still lack any type of mechanism that allows their voices to be truly heard. Such is the case of native peoples in Paraguay, where, although Guaraní is the country's official language, they still suffer from different forms of discrimination and social exclusion.

And how to comprehend the president of Chile, a woman and socialist, who responds to the demands of Mapuches for land rights and constitutional recognition as an indigenous people, by permitting the enactment of anti-terrorist legislation; or the violence suffered by the Zapatistas in the Mexican province of Chiapas, as they try to consolidate their ethnic autonomy and specific way of life.

In Brazil, where there are 220 indigenous groups speaking more than 180 languages, it has been clear that in spite of a president such as Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, those who really benefit from the country's progress have been the more conservative elements of society, with banking and private sector interests, and not Brazil's indigenous races.

The ancestral peoples of Brazil have suffered a wave of hatred, the killing of their leaders, malnutrition decimating their children, and the loss of their land, while the government of that country prepares a Fast-track Growth Plan, without taking into account the reality of the indigenous population who occupy an Amazon basin rich in biodiversity and mineral resources, and is concerned only to respond to the demands of political, party and business interests.

Certainly, the WSF has helped create the conditions for the exchange of ideas and interests among related countries, stimulating awareness about social and environmental issues among young people, and helping to foster the next generation of leaders, but the same cannot be said in relation to native peoples.

This view corresponds to the prophecy made by the late Xamã Terena, that the government will always be the government, and native peoples will always be indigenous.

For the hopes and aspirations of indigenous peoples were not even met when old allies belonging to the leftwing parties were elected to the executive branch, once more showing, like their centre and right-wing counterparts, a lack of strength and conviction to adopt or implement the recommendations they had received, a situation mirrored even within the WSF.

However, another world is possible, and the struggle must continue!

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**P.S.**

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