



KEYNOTE SPEAKER

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STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIP IN PHILANTHROPY

Building Effective Grantmaking in Indigenous Communities

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I am very much honoured and pleased to have been invited by the International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) to participate in this Conference on Strengthening Partnership in Philanthropy.

I had worked with the Government of India for 10 years before I joined IFAD in 1981 and during this period I spent a great deal of my time in far flung rural areas listening and talking to the very poor and the most marginalized. This has been my most precious experience. It was in these remote areas that I encountered indigenous peoples and their efforts to keep control of their lands and their institutions, to have their own worldview honoured and respected and to be active participants in the creation of their own development visions and plans.

We have supported them with development projects for their ancestral lands and territories. However, as we gained experience we started to realize that our technical solutions and approaches were sadly very much guided mainly by the knowledge, attitudes and concerns of mainstream and dominant societies. Today we have come to acknowledge that if our development efforts are to be meaningful to Indigenous Peoples then we must accept their guiding principle that development initiatives in the ancestral lands and territories must have their free, prior and informed consent.

I have no doubt that the foundation of any solid partnership with Indigenous Peoples must be based on our courage and humility to listen to this call of the Indigenous Peoples. It is therefore very important that at all times, the issues of the poor and the marginalized amongst the Indigenous Peoples must be the rallying points of our enhanced partnership. “Nothing for Indigenous Peoples, without Indigenous Peoples”.

But some people and institutions do feel uncomfortable with a partnership with Indigenous Peoples that is based on the principle of their free, prior and informed consent. I hope that the sharing of ideas through this Conference will help us to find

pragmatic ways how the principle of free, prior and informed consent could become a driving value for all of us, not only for the believers in the cause of Indigenous Peoples but for all those who interact with them.

Our experience in the field has also taught us that indigenous peoples do not see marginalization only as a lack of income. They are concerned with a trampling of their dignity, with humiliation and with powerlessness. The displacement of their communities from their traditional lands, the marginalization of their traditional institutions and the militarization of the territories are some of the realities of their poverty and their powerlessness. To indigenous peoples, their marginalization is very much entwined with the lack of respect for their political, cultural and economic rights.

When we speak about the rights of Indigenous Peoples, let us not forget that Indigenous Peoples are constantly looking for partnership with local or global collaborators who would empower them with a development approach that is based on Dignity and Identity, an approach that builds on social solidarity and the ethos of sharing and harmony, that upholds the preciousness of traditional lands and territories to Indigenous Communities, that promotes a strong gender focus, that respects traditional experiences and yet that has no fear of modern challenges.

They are looking for an approach that has a holistic vision that includes economic growth, sustainable development of the environment and that constantly affirms the social, economic and cultural rights of Indigenous Peoples. Despite the many historical injustices, indigenous peoples are eager to work together with governments and philanthropic organizations as long as there is a spirit of peaceful co-existence and mutual benefit. But they expect the State and international organizations to take action to protect and fulfil their obligations to them. As we ponder on strengthening our partnership in philanthropy, let us also think of how we could create opportunities and mechanisms for grassroots actors to periodically assess the implementation of development initiatives and how we could empower such grassroots organizations to oblige national and global authorities to sit up and officially listen.

One of our most fulfilling experiences is to witness the transformational role of women in community affairs when given a decision-making role. For example, in North East India, an IFAD funded project is helping women to organize themselves into Self-Help Groups. After some years of exchange of ideas and training, these groups are today gradually transforming their rural communities by their discipline of weekly meetings, weekly savings and by confronting issues that they themselves define as crucial.

For example, in some areas Self-Help Groups are also playing an important role in peace-making in communities affected by armed conflict and insecurity. Indeed, through their involvement in self help groups, some women are becoming leaders, instigating change in social practices and relationships and mobilizing social action for social justice. I hope that this Conference will explore the role of Indigenous women to improve the well being of indigenous communities.

I come from North East India, a region that is identified as one of the world's biodiversity hot spots where some of the communities follow a matrilineal system and where literacy is quite high because of the work of Christian Missions. Yet this is an

isolated area where there are very few partnerships with international organizations until recently. There are many more isolated areas of this nature around the world that could benefit from a culturally sensitive local-global collaboration. My wife and I have had some very exciting experiences of trying to build such bridges between our friends and local communities.

I sincerely hope that in your discussions, you will take time to also explore new opportunities for partnership with local communities who live in such isolated areas of the world. Your partnership with such communities will bring hope to them and in return you will be inspired to do more for human development.

In my community, we have a traditional system of community philanthropy. Every time the mother of the house sits down to prepare a meal. She would set aside a fistful of rice for unexpected guest or for local charity. It was this form of local capital formation that many Churches used to build their church buildings.

A few weeks ago, I took part in a Church Centenary Service in a remote village in my home state, Meghalaya. There was a congregation of 200,000 people and the villagers had used the traditional system of fistful of rice to save for over a year to feed this huge congregation. It was a humbling experience to see what community philanthropy in a poor and isolated area could provide. I think community philanthropy could be an exciting partnership programme for members of IFIP.

Within the international organizations and our partners in development, there is today an increased focus on harmonisation of processes in activities such as procurement and even in development approaches. Indeed, the focus on harmonization is because of our earlier failures to coordinate effectively amongst ourselves at a country or local level. This is a valid initiative. However, when dealing with Indigenous Peoples we must constantly remind ourselves that in our new-found zeal to harmonize, we must not undermine the value of diversity.

There are of course new areas of coordination that we must also dare to tread. For example, one of the challenges of small grants is the cost of supervision. This is perhaps one of the areas where members of IFIP could develop a coordinated programme of supervision, monitoring and fiduciary oversight.

Philanthropic organizations are being increasingly professionalized as their contribution to development has increased significantly. However as you enhance your skills and coverage, I sincerely hope you will not lose sight of the value of flexibility and the space that you have always given to others to be creative and to think out of the box. These are your hallmarks.

I wish you all the best as you try to make the world listen to the silence of the Indigenous Peoples and as you try to open its eyes to their invisibility.

Thank you.