

WHO WE ARE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN ASIA



More and more people in Asia identify themselves as belonging to Indigenous Peoples.

This however does not mean that we claim to be the only people native to our countries. In most cases we are the “aboriginal” or “native” people of the lands we live in, and other people have come to settle there later. But we have also lived side-by-side with other peoples, native to their own lands, who however do not call themselves Indigenous Peoples. These are usually the dominant people, who have the economic and political power in our countries.

In some cases communities of Indigenous Peoples were forced to leave their lands because of violent conflicts, and to move to another country, like to Thailand, Vietnam, or Laos. There, they are clearly not the first inhabitants, the aboriginal or native people. But they still remain Indigenous Peoples.

Most of our peoples are small in numbers. Some have populations of just a few thousand, or even just a few hundred. But we all have our own distinct language, culture, customary laws and social and political institutions that are very different from those of the dominant ethnic groups in our countries. While we find an enormous diversity among Indigenous Peoples, common to us all are the strong cultural attachment to and the dependence of our livelihoods on land, forests or the sea, and the natural resources therein.

We are using the term Indigenous Peoples with a meaning that is different from that given in dictionaries. Over the past decades, the concept of Indigenous Peoples has evolved beyond the original meaning still found in dictionaries, and it is now well established in international law. That is why we are writing it with capital initial letters.

It is a foreign term for most of us, and it is often difficult to translate it into our own languages. In our countries we first of all use the names which our ancestors have given ourselves. Then there are the names which other people have given us. In many cases they are derogatory, and we resent them.

And there are the names which governments use to refer to us collectively – like “ethnic minorities”, “hill tribes”, “tribal people”, “aboriginal people”, “native people”. Some of these terms are not appreciated by many of us, since they often imply notions of cultural inferiority, being “primitive” or “backward”. Examples are *chuncheat* (meaning “ethnicity”, or literally “national people” in Cambodia), *upajati* (“tribal”) in Bangladesh, *sakai* (literally meaning “slave”) used in Thailand for some of the hunter-gatherer groups, or *fan* (“primitive people”) introduced by the Han Chinese settlers when they came to Taiwan. In some countries the popular or official terms have however come to be accepted and are now often used by ourselves (like “tribal” in India).

There are special laws which have been passed by some of our governments which already recognize that we are different and that our rights need to be protected. But even where such laws exist, they are not sufficient, and our communities continue to suffer from discrimination, dispossession and exploitation.





We need better protection of our rights, and we believe that international legal instruments can help us obtain this protection. Within international law the instruments that are most appropriate for our situation, our needs and aspirations are the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and ILO Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (Convention 169). ILO Convention 169 refers to both Indigenous Peoples and Tribal Peoples. In some Asian countries the term “tribal” is more acceptable to and even officially used by governments. In the UNDRIP however, only one term was kept, and it was agreed that it should be Indigenous Peoples.

There are provisions useful for us in other international legal instruments, like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, or the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. However, ILO Convention 169 and above all the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are most appropriate for us since they explicitly refer to collective rights. We are discriminated as peoples, not just as individuals, and we therefore seek the recognition as peoples and the protection of our collective rights by our countries.

While we hold on to and assert our own distinct identities, it is for this reason that we have joined other peoples elsewhere in the world and now call ourselves Indigenous Peoples.

“Indigenous communities, peoples and nations [are] those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of societies now prevailing in those territories or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.”

Definition of Indigenous Peoples according to Rodolfo Stavenhagen, UN Special Rapporteur for the study of discrimination against Indigenous Peoples





How are Indigenous Peoples called in Asia? A few examples

India

The government of India refers to Indigenous Peoples as *Scheduled Tribes*. In mainland India, *Adivasi* has become the popular term. It means “original people”. The Indigenous Peoples of India’s North East do not call themselves, nor are they referred to as *Adivasi* in spite of the fact that the meaning of the term very much applies to them as well. They prefer to use the English terms “tribals” or Indigenous Peoples.

Nepal

Nepal is one of the countries in Asia where Indigenous peoples are constitutionally and legally recognized. They are officially called “*Adivasi Janajati*” (indigenous nationalities).

Philippines

While the term *tribo* (tribe) is still quite commonly used, Indigenous Peoples and its translation into local languages are now well established in popular usage. The Philippines is one of the Asian countries that have officially recognized Indigenous Peoples. In the constitution, laws and other official documents they are referred to as “Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples”.

Taiwan

The Han Chinese settlers used the term “*fan*”, which denoted the indigenous peoples as barbarian, primitive or backward. Later the indigenous peoples living in upland areas were referred to as “*shanbao*” (mountain compatriots or mountain people). In the mid-1980s indigenous activists initiated a campaign for the recognition of *yuan-zhu-min* (literally meaning “people who have originally lived here”) as a more respectful name. It gained legal status through amendment of the Constitution in 1994.

Thailand

The fishing communities of the South (who call themselves Moken) are called in Thai *chao thale* (meaning “sea people”). The term *chao khao* (“hill tribes”) and *chon phao* (“tribal people”) are commonly used to refer to the Indigenous Peoples of the North and West of the country. Indigenous rights advocacy groups have begun to promote the term *chon phao phuen mueang* as translation of “Indigenous Peoples”.

Vietnam

Indigenous Peoples in Vietnam are subsumed under the category “ethnic minorities” (*dan toc thieu so, dan toc it nguoi*). This refers to all people who do not belong to the dominant ethnic group, the Kinh. It therefore also includes ethnic groups like Chinese or Khmer, who are minorities but generally not considered to be Indigenous Peoples.

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