UNGA: Special Session on Indigenous Affairs

Delegate of Mali

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*Introduction*

The Republic of Mali is a landlocked, West African country that extends into the Sahara Desert in the north with a population of around 17.5 million. By area, Mali is the 24th largest country in the world. Its official language is French, with an additional 13 national languages.

The situation of indigenous peoples in Africa is extremely serious. The level of bad credit governance, corruption, violent conflict and poverty is in general very high on the African continent, as well as in Mali, and indigenous peoples are among the groups suffering the most. Indigenous peoples in Africa suffer from severe neglect, dispossession and human rights violations, and the general trend seen is that African states wish to assimilate them into dominant cultures and livelihoods. In West Africa, where Mali is located, the discourse of indigenous peoples is in general not known or used. There are some pastoral organizations and a regional pastoral network (Billital Maroobe), however, they are only to a limited degree integrated in the African indigenous movement.

Apart from the Republic of Congo, where the Parliament on the 30th December 2010, adopted a law for the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples, no countries in Africa have legislation that provide for the protection of indigenous peoples’ rights. While Mali has tried to make progress on this issue, political unrest and the violent takeover of its northern regions by extremist rebel groups in 2012 threaten to reverse that progress. The Tuareg (pastoralists) and the Songhai (sedentary, from Gao and Timbuktu) represent the largest indigenous groups in northern Mali, and are historically opposed to each other.

During this committee session, the delegation of Mali is committed to ensuring that the global issues regarding the mistreatment and underrepresentation of indigenous peoples are answered.

*Topic 1: Indigenous Peoples, Healthcare, Mental Health, and Wellness*

Depression, substance abuse, and suicide represent the areas of greatest need with regard to the mental health of indigenous peoples. These problems cannot be separated from the social, cultural, and historic contexts in which they occur. A strictly biomedical approach to depression is insufficient when the individuals seeking treatment are constantly facing life conditions that generate stress. This means that any mental health program for indigenous peoples must offer a community psychiatry perspective broad enough to address both the needs of individuals, and the worlds in which they live in.

Mali has a critical shortage of qualified health workers. Those it does have are concentrated in urban areas and the southern part of the country, leaving rural and northern communities particularly vulnerable to health threats. These rural areas with little access are where the Indigenous people of Mali reside. The capital, Bamako, has two large hospitals and there are hospitals in other main towns and cities. However, the low life expectancy of 53 years in Mali reflects the generally poor standards of healthcare available in much of the country. For every 1,000 live births, 184 children are likely to die before their fifth birthday (WHO 2009). As of 2009, there were only 729 physicians registered in Mali, which is less than one doctor for every 10,000 people. These statistics increase drastically when linked to just the indigenous groups of Mali, as their more significant remoteness, cultural barriers, languages differences, force them into a general lack of access to medical care.

The interrelationship between sociocultural environments and mental health must be held firmly in mind when discussing the mental health of indigenous peoples. The evidence of linkages between the poor mental health of Indigenous peoples and the history of colonialism is key to improving the wellness in communities. Conversely, there is sufficient evidence that strengthening cultural identity, community integration, and political empowerment contributes to improvement of mental health in Indigenous populations including at risk youth and women. Preserving the overall wellness of indigenous people can be done by creating different initiatives that respect indigenous practices and traditions, but also educate the youth through leadership programs on mental health and wellness in general. Therefore, finding health staff that speak and understand indigenous languages is important in order for a connection to be made and a message to be sent. Potentially creating alliances with traditional healers and incorporating their skills into national health care systems, or for remote communities, through NGOs that are funded to distribute aid, can help to combat the lack of access indigenous people accept.

Furthermore, because mental health is one of the most extreme issues facing Indigenous communities, it requires significant attention including the promotion of intervention and prevention strategies that encompass traditional medicine and healing approaches.

*Topic 2: Indigenous Land Rights, Climate Change impacts and Environmental Protection of Resources*

A significant proportion of the world's 350 million indigenous peoples reside in remote areas of the globe, often the most marketable of destinations. In many instances, their territories are targeted for hydroelectric dams, open pit mines, and oil exploration, and have become focal points of vicious protest. The land dispossession undermines indigenous peoples’ livelihood systems, leads to severe impoverishment and threatens the continued existence of indigenous peoples. Legal frameworks promoting and protecting indigenous peoples’ lands are very weak or non-existing, and policies are most often negatively biased against indigenous peoples and tend to undermine rather than support their livelihoods.

As a relatively poor country, Mali relies on its natural resources (gold and cotton) as exports, making the land of indigenous people less relevant and important. Also, the agriculture industry makes up 80% of the labor force, making the indigenous land rights that conserve their environment ignored. In Mali, and across the world, there is no punishment for corporations or government when the indigenous land rights are not respected, making their voices unheard.

In order for the Indigenous population to gain respect, their voices must be heard – and this can be done through NGOs that aid with the preservation of the indigenous culture while creating compromises between government and corporations in order to create a cycle of respect. This should be done because recognizing traditional practices contributes to sustainable development and proper management of the environment, overall aiding the effects of climate change as well as preserving culture.

*Topic 3: Indigenous Peoples, Poverty, and Development*

The indigenous population is among the poorest group in the world, as they are and have faced discrimination, targeted genocide, and are generally disregarded by the rest of the world. When trying to explain high level of disease occurrence in indigenous population, the pressing issues of poverty and social inequalities cannot be ignored, as they are major contributing factors to the high number of illnesses (Communicable diseases and non-communicable diseases) seen in the indigenous population. Low poverty in indigenous populations is also highly linked to the level of education provided for them. The education gap between indigenous peoples and mainstream populations remains critical: rates of enrolment retention, completion of and performance at primary school level are significantly lower and gender inequalities are often distinct.

In Africa, Indigenous Peoples have consistently worse human development indicators than the non-indigenous populations. Indigenous peoples have not been reached by development efforts as their poverty rates and human development indicators generally remain below the average of their countries, and further they have not seen an improvement over time. Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 178 out of 182 countries in the 2009 UNDP Human Development Index. It is estimated that 60 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, most of them women and children in rural areas.

In order for the poverty rate in Mali and across the globe for indigenous people to decrease, education for all must become a priority, but in order to give a the indigenous youth an education that they cannot only understand (in their language) but grasp and hold on to, educators should be indigenous leaders that have maybe been trained by an outside source or an NGO that also contains indigenous people willing to educate communities. With this increased education level, the fight against indigenous poverty will become less brutal as education opens doors to opportunities that could help them support their families - This along with universal and sufficiently funded healthcare and access to mental health resources.

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