

RESPONSE TO CALL FOR INPUT REPORT ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES TO THEIR TRADITIONAL ECONOMIES

Introduction

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) is an international membership organisation of over 40 unrecognised and unrepresented nations and peoples. The UNPO is a global platform committed to amplifying the voices of unrepresented peoples, securing their equal participation on the world stage and safeguarding their fundamental rights. A core principle of the UNPO is the right to self-determination, which is understood as the right of peoples to determine their own destiny and to have a voice in the form of their economic, cultural and social development, including their political status. The UNPO recognises that the importance of this right lies in the right of choice, with this choice potentially leading to different outcomes for each community.

Many of the UNPO's members are indigenous peoples. Some of these communities include the Baluch, Khmer-Krom, the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the River Peoples of Zambesia. For these unrepresented indigenous peoples, the limitation and repression of their right to self-determination impacts their ability to enjoy their fundamental human rights and lead a traditional way of life.

The opportunity for these indigenous communities to participate in the national or international stage is limited and therefore they struggle to fully realise their rights to civil and political participation and control their economic, social and cultural development. This lack of representation and exclusion from political decision-making in policies that impact indigenous land often leads to practices of landgrabbing, resource exploitation, environmental degradation, limitation of basic resources like water, food insecurity, and abject poverty. This, in turn, has an impact on the traditional livelihoods of indigenous communities by restricting their ability to live by their traditional practices, such as subsistence farming and fishing. Each of these issues will be highlighted in greater detail below, in respect of the Baluch, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Khmer-Krom, and Zambesian indigenous communities.

Baluch

The Baluch people are divided across Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in a region referred to as Baluchistan. Within Iran, the Baluch people are indigenous to Sistan and Baluchistan – an area which constitutes the second largest of Iran's 31 provinces in the southeast of the country, bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, under the central government, the Baluch people (and other ethnic minorities) are subjected to discriminatory policies leading to high poverty and unemployment rates, a lack of suitable infrastructure and input in decision-making processes, as well as poor water management and flood responses by national authorities, which place the community's access to safe and sufficient water at risk.

While the province of Sistan and Baluchistan is abundant in natural resources, the region is one of the most impoverished provinces in Iran. This includes high rates of poverty, unemployment as well as a scarcity of essential resources like water and food.

It is estimated that approximately 45% of the population is below the absolute poverty rate, resulting in nearly half the Baluch population facing a daily struggle to secure basic necessary sustenance. This crisis of unemployment has forced the local community to resort to the erratic and unsafe practice of 'sukhtbari' (fuel carrier), to transport fuel from Baluch Iran into Pakistan. Those carrying fuel are regularly targeted by the border control and Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) who open fire on the carriers leading to deadly consequences such as tanker explosions and casualties.

The Baluch people in Sistan and Baluchistan further face the consequences of poorly maintained infrastructure and mismanagement of resources, like water. The poor maintenance by the central government has caused residents of the province to lack access to safe water and sanitation services, leading to unsafe practices to fulfil daily needs. The province traditionally did not lack water sources, however, in recent years has been subjected to vast droughts. This has been exacerbated not only by state mismanagement but also by the excessive dam building by state-owned enterprises.

The Baluch people traditionally lived off fishing and reed making in areas such as the Hamon Lake and Wetland, which historically was Iran's third largest lake and yielded about 12,000 tons of fish annually. However, as a result of the national authorities' mismanagement of water in the region, the Hamon wetland has dramatically dried up causing a stark rise in unemployment locally. The water mismanagement also resulted in the drying up of other vital rivers and water resources in the region, thereby damaging 90% of the agricultural products in Sistan and Baluchistan. The reduced water flow has further accelerated the destruction and extinction of agriculture, animal husbandry and fishing practices. In addition to impacting the livelihoods of the Baluch people, the increase in environmental challenges has forced many locals to be displaced, often resettling in slums on the outskirts of bigger cities.

In each of these challenges highlighted above, the central government has failed to take active measures to address the rising consequences within the Sistan and Baluchistan province. Similarly, the failure to include the Baluch people in the decision-making process has impeded upon and placed their traditional livelihoods at risk giving rise to stark poverty and unemployment.

Khmer-Krom

The Khmer-Krom are the indigenous Khmer population of the Mekong Delta and one of the largest indigenous peoples in Viet Nam. Nonetheless, the central Viet Nameese government has refused to recognise the indigenous status of the Khmer-Krom, instead labelling them as one of the 53 ethnic minorities in Viet Nam. The absence of indigenous status denies the Khmer-Krom access to international bodies, resulting in their widespread disenfranchisement, discrimination, violation of fundamental human rights and a denial of their right to self-determination. Similarly a refusal to recognise the indigenous status has, inter alia, justified the government's land appropriation and denial of the Khmer-Krom's access to traditional livelihoods, exacerbating levels of poverty.

The vast majority of the Khmer-Krom live in agrarian societies with economic livelihood tied to farming and agriculture. As a result, access to land is vital for the Khmer-Krom's income and welfare. However, government land appropriation is a significant challenge for economic opportunities, with the Mekong Delta being reported to have the second highest level of landlessness in Viet Nam.

Viet Nameese government programs have socialised land ownership and redistributed access to farmland. Furthermore, industrial farming practices – requiring significant economic investments – have been introduced posing a formidable barrier to poor local farmers.

Traditionally, Khmer-Krom farmers only farmed once a year. In recent years, however, the increasing rice exportation demands have forced the Khmer Krom to farm for three seasons a year, under intimidation by local authorities. To meet these demands, Khmer farmers must use costly and environmentally hazardous fertilisers and pesticides. This act has led to a poverty-reinforcing cycle as Khmer farmers must take out financial loans to cover the costs of farming; over-farming which causes soil degradation; and the state's price control of rice. To add to this issue, Khmer-Krom farmers report that corrupt local authorities are unresponsive to their land rights complaints, make biased decisions, and below-market value acquisitions of their land.

The above, coupled with climate change has increased the experience of droughts in the region meaning that Khmer farmers are often unable to break even, forcing them to sell their land and livelihoods. Although the Mekong Delta is Viet Nam's most productive rice-growing region, the Khmer-Krom are not afforded access to the opportunities provided by the burgeoning economy. Instead the Khmer-Krom suffer the highest rates of poverty of all minorities in the Mekong region, owing to land displacement and unsustainable farming practices they are forced to participate in.

The vicious cycle of poverty forces young people to leave the Mekong Delta region and seek work in factories in cities. Similarly a lack of education in the Khmer language places young Khmer people at a disadvantage, forcing them to take on low skilled and low paying jobs in the future.

The above challenges have reinforced a vicious cycle of endemic poverty, lack of access to national and international institutions, refusal to recognise the right to self-determination, systemic disenfranchisement, economic hardship and a lack of opportunities for the Khmer-Krom.

Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)

There are approximately 54 indigenous communities in Bangladesh, representing about 1.8% of the population. These indigenous peoples have a deep spiritual, cultural, social, and economic connection to their land, which forms the foundation of their existence and survival.

This connection and livelihood has been placed at risk due to the widespread dispossession and land grabbing under the pretext of large-scale development projects by both state and non-state actors. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, countless indigenous peoples have lost their farming lands and sources of livelihood, while facing continual displacement from their ancestral land and homesteads.

In 2022, the lands belonging to the indigenous peoples in the Bandarban District were leased to 64 military-civilian bureaucrats and influential persons of the area. This resulted in the formation of a rubber company (the Lama Rubber Company), supported by security forces and local administration, which encroached upon 3,500 acres of land – including cultivable farming land and forest areas in the indigenous villages. The Company's work resulted in fires in the area, causing 40 families in the indigenous villages to face acute shortages of food and drinking water.

Other incidents involving the Lama Rubber Company included workers spraying poison in the Kalaia Jhiri area, the main source of water for hunting fish for the indigenous peoples of the region. It is reported that this was done to force villagers living in the area to leave. The poison caused water to become contaminated thus leaving no safe water to drink and causing the number of fish, shrimp and crabs in the region to decline.

In similar circumstances, it is reported that a multi-level marketing company undertook afforestation programmes for commercial purposes in the Chemi Dalupara area under Bandarban sadar upazila (sub-district). To conduct its commercial activities, the company occupied private lands owned by indigenous villagers and purchased lands that were leased out to non-residents of the CHT. In 2008, workers of the company tried to clear out the land by setting fire to the existing forest and orchard owned by the indigenous villagers. The shrinking indigenous land for commercial purposes has caused the livelihoods of villagers to become extremely uncertain.

The above projects, and others, are often supported by military and civil administration, resulting in the expropriation of indigenous land and forests through leases granted to rubber companies, other businesses and influential individuals. This leaves little room for the indigenous peoples of the CHT to maintain their traditional livelihoods or to be included as part of the national decision-making, thus hindering sustainable agricultural and resources practices in the CHT.

Zambesia

The indigenous peoples of Zambesia inhabit territories that currently fall within the borders of Namibia, Botswana and Zambia; between the north of the Kalahari Desert and south of the Zambezi River. The people of Zambesia are commonly referred to as 'The River Races' since they live next to the Zambezi river, and their way of living, culture and traditions are rooted in the land and water. Zambesia is a region rich in resources, with fertile soils and adequate rain fed crops expanding throughout the whole territory.

Similarly, the Zambezi River, which is the fourth-longest river on the continent, provides vast and strategic access to one of the most important water sources in the region. As a result, its neighbouring and occupying countries have exploited the region's resources for their own benefit for decades. Zambesia has accordingly been deprived of exercising control over the Zambezi River and of being included in the decision-making processes that affect the indigenous community. Zambesians are thus unable to directly benefit from the natural resources in the region, limiting their traditional livelihoods.

Within Namibia, Zambesians living in the Caprivi Strip are isolated from the rest of the country and face severe consequences as a result. This area remains largely rural with little development compared to the rest of the country, and the needs of the local population are often ignored. The rural isolation of the Caprivi Strip, which is part of the Zambezi Region, exacerbates these issues, further contributing to widespread poverty and limited access to healthcare and education due to the lack of critical infrastructure and economic opportunities. The Zambezi Region is reported to be one of the most underdeveloped areas in Namibia.

In 2019, the Namibian government approved a 99-year lease to a Chinese company authorising the company to grow tobacco in the eastern Caprivi Zipfel. This project undermined the Zambesian's right to food security when the company sought 10,000 hectares of land for the purposes of developing tobacco plantations. The project sparked controversy within local communities that opposed these developments due to the potential risks to food security and environmental sustainability. Although opposition from local communities delayed the project for five years, they were ultimately unsuccessful in preventing the development of tobacco plantations.

Zambesia's lack of official recognition as an indigenous people has played a part in their underrepresentation in political processes, decision-making, and the erosion of their political, cultural and economic rights. This has given rise to the dispossession of their land, environmental degradation, and the undermining of their livelihoods and cultural preservation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The above cases illustrate the relationship between the right to self-determination and the ability for indigenous peoples to live by their traditional livelihoods and foster traditional economies. A lack of representation and exclusion of peoples from decision-making processes and the exploitation of indigenous land in unsustainable practices has countless negative consequences for these communities.

Some of the examples highlighted above include the limitation of safe drinking water and infrastructure, the destruction of the natural environment and indigenous land, encroachment upon agriculture, food insecurity, displacement and poverty. In light thereof, the UNPO makes the following recommendations:

- International and national recognition of indigenous peoples under international frameworks, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and ILO Convention No. 169, to ensure the protection of indigenous peoples and their rights, including their free, prior and informed consent on matters relating to their indigenous land.
- Protection of the fundamental human rights of indigenous peoples, including the right of all peoples to self-determination.
- Inclusion of indigenous peoples and their traditional practices in national frameworks and decision-making processes to ensure sustainable resource extraction and management.
- Appropriate and effective resource management by national authorities to prevent the limitation for food security and access to water.
- Greater support for small-scale subsistence farming, food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture practices which enable, rather than hinder, traditional economies.