
Unexpected Outcomes: Networking in and around Beyond the Permanent Forum Sessions

By Janet Chernela (U Maryland)

Many of the most important decisions and activities that take place during the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples occur outside the formal session in meetings and events spontaneously arranged in corridors and nearby venues. The range of topics covered in these “side events” is wide and not subject to official scrutiny or authorization; participation is unrestricted; and conversation is often spontaneous and interactive. Events include planned programs such as films or exhibits as well as informal caucuses.

During the two-week span of the recent forum the Latin American Regional Caucus met several times to discuss common problems as well as to prepare joint interventions and coordinate strategies. Among this year’s accomplishments was the organization of a listserv for disseminating information between indigenous organizations of Latin America. Within a month after the forum, the Latin American Caucus had opened this listserv to any individual or indigenous group in Latin America, seeking the broadest participation possible. Immediately following the forum, participants circulated a draft of recommendations for the next forum, inviting input from listserv participants. Later, the caucus sought input on issues related to future participation in the UNPFII, including available support from the UN’s voluntary fund and other income sources. It was agreed upon generally that there was a need to create space for maximum participation by indigenous groups. Funding from northern NGOs to participate in the forum is problematic since these tend to lack coherent mechanisms for selecting indigenous representatives, relying instead on informal acquaintance networks.

Many who participated in this year’s Latin American Caucus would have had no other way to meet if it were not for their participation in the UNPFII. With the formation of the listserv, the number of those who participate in discussions about indigenous issues can be expected to expand geometrically. Unlike the forum itself, the listserv requires no outside funding for travel; its discourse is unrestricted; and its membership self-appointed. While its decisions will not have the power of international bodies, the potential of the listserv to catalyze interaction is immeasurable. In terms of process, decisions made between annual forums and among those unable to attend meetings, can be expected to feed into and complement the existing forum process.

The caucus’ listserv not only plays an important role in informing indigenous entities in Latin America about the existence of the UNPFII and funding resources, but it enables collaboration for action across national boundaries. The state oil company of Brazil, for example, carries out numerous exploration activities in the Andean nations that impact indigenous peoples. Recently the Huarani of the Ecuadorian Amazon demonstrated in Quito to petition the Brazilian state oil firm Petrobras to leave the Yasuni National Park and the Huaorani Indigenous Territory. The caucus listserv, which reaches a Brazilian constituency, was able to mobilize Brazilian organizations to petition their government on behalf of the indigenous peoples of Ecuador.

The forum provides an important context for the formation of regional and global networks of indigenous organizations whose impacts extend far beyond the spatial and participatory boundaries of the annual meetings.