

UNDRR Indigenous Peoples Statement, 2019

Major Group on Indigenous DRR

As Indigenous Peoples, we continue to assert the rights of our communities to determine their development, protect our women and children, safeguard our lands, our waters, and the ecosystems we have lived within for many generations. These rights are enshrined in the many treaties between Member states and Indigenous Peoples and are reflected in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Our communities and our knowledges, our women and young people, our traditional practices and stories, all these components of our lives are now regularly noted in various United Nations agreements. And yet we remain vulnerable.

Too often our Elders, our knowledge holders, leaders and community members, including those who live in urban areas, suffer blatant racism. Too often, the daily struggle for survival trumps the need for long-term strategic solutions to pressing social, environmental, and economic needs. Our knowledges continue to inform our lives, and can often be seen in our response to disasters and recovery. But these knowledges are threatened through the loss or isolation of knowledge holders and Elders, difficulties in passing on ancient knowledge, and ongoing effects from the disaster of colonization. They are also threatened through efforts by so-called Western science to cut and paste Indigenous knowledges in the construction of databases, archives, programs and policies. Therefore, finding a safe place for our knowledges in the vital DRR strategies that must follow remains a priority. Our knowledge holders protect their knowledge but are not selfish. Where it can be safely, respectfully and appropriately used, it will be offered.

If basic human rights principles are not applied before a disaster, it is impossible for these principles to be applied post-disaster. Discrimination in the post-disaster allocation of resources, ignoring cultural requirements for respecting the dead, and excluding cultural practices in how we wish to approach disaster and emergency management adds insult to injury. The exclusion of Indigenous voices in the short-term response and the long-term recovery to disasters embeds ongoing vulnerabilities into our communities. Now there is a growing urgency to deal with ever-expanding hazardous landscapes interwoven with complex, interrelated technological systems increasingly governed by faceless algorithms. What is to be done?

There are, of course, many wonderful collaborative programs working towards strengthening Indigenous communities. Indigenous thought and practice can and should contribute to defining the terminology of hazards, disasters, resilience and wellbeing. But our approaches are beyond interdisciplinarity, they are trans-discipline, trans-systemic. However, moving forward requires us to be an automatic choice at the table. Let us debate within ourselves who and how that space will be occupied, but do not force us to beg for admission. Let us have our own dedicated space while also accepting that our communities have interests across all the areas of DRR, just as we have interests across biological diversity, intellectual property, sustainability, health and well-being and climate change. Attendance at Global and Regional Platforms is logistically difficult, even impossible, for Indigenous representatives. Member states with Indigenous Peoples can sponsor attendance, can support Indigenous youth leaders, can open the space and then step aside and let it be filled by those leaders among us who have a mandate to speak for our communities. There is now a call to have an International Year of Indigenous Disaster Risk Reduction. We respectfully request the chance to display our collective Indigenous intelligence and power.

We are proud to be Indigenous, we feel blessed. And in many ways we are all Indigenous to the planet. Perhaps what we need is the re-indigenizing of humanity that elevates living on this sphere to be a blessing for us all and not a disastrous curse for the planet.