

**Fourth Session of the Intergovernmental Working Group on a  
United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other  
People Working in Rural Areas**

15–19 May 2017  
Geneva

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Distinguished Madam Chair- Rapporteur, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to the organizers for this invitation and for the opportunity to speak at this extremely important session to deliberate and hopefully finalize the text of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas. I would also like to commend the Working Group for the groundbreaking work done in preparing this draft declaration, which is of critical significance to the lives of rural people around the world, and is thus greatly needed.

In the few minutes that I have, I would like to highlight five serious problems faced by peasants and other rural communities, present five reasons why I think this declaration is of great importance, and discuss five issues that could be strengthened in order take this declaration forward.

**Problems Faced by Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas**

**1. Multiple human rights violations**

Peasants and other rural peoples, around the world, despite their significant contributions to food security, sustainable development, and biodiversity conservation, suffer from extreme poverty, hunger, and discrimination. Unfortunately, the situation is only getting worse. Even since the discussions on this declaration commenced, rural communities have witnessed growing violations of their human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as increased marginalisation, neglect, exclusion, violence, and impoverishment. Those working to defend their rights are witnessing increased repression and persecution, including arbitrary arrests, detention, criminalization, and in extreme cases, even death. Among rural communities, certain groups face greater marginalization and discrimination. These include indigenous peoples, historically discriminated communities, women, and the landless. Despite the widespread violations of the human rights of peasants and other rural communities, there is limited awareness and documentation of these violations and even less attention paid to them. This reality highlights the exigency of finalizing and adopting this declaration.

**2. Acute agrarian crisis**

The absence of human rights-based agrarian reform and a failure to adequately invest in agriculture has resulted in an acute agrarian crisis. It is a cruel irony that those who feed the world suffer from hunger and malnutrition. This reveals a gross failure of governance, not just nationally but also globally. It also highlights the need to address the macroeconomic roots of this inequality and the unquestioned perpetuation of a global economic order that promotes social injustice while failing to protect the most marginalized from the vagaries of the market and international trade regimes, including over their lives, lands, seeds, and other natural resources. The agrarian crisis has resulted

in growing indebtedness and impoverishment of farmers, leading to the extreme situation of suicide in several countries. This is a human rights emergency reflecting the grave reality facing peasants today, which, as human rights advocates, we should be ashamed of.

### **3. Discrimination against rural women and the failure to recognize women as farmers**

Rural women constitute a quarter of the world's population but suffer disproportionately from poverty, exclusion, malnutrition, and inter-sectional and multiple forms of discrimination. With the feminization of agriculture, women's share in the agricultural workforce has been rising but in many countries, women are not legally recognized as peasants/farmers. Women's contributions to food security and sovereignty, to the rural economy, and to environmental sustainability are also not adequately acknowledged. Furthermore, they are denied their equal rights to land, housing, property, inheritance, participation, information, and access to financial services and credit.

### **4. Land grabbing, forced evictions, and displacement**

People in rural areas face severe challenges related to accessing, asserting, and maintaining their rights to land. Forced land acquisition, evictions, and displacement along with increased insecurity are pervasive problems, especially in the global south. It is estimated that at least 15 million people are forcibly displaced from their homes and lands every year. In many countries, the state acquires land for the ostensible reason of 'public purpose'—a concept that is often ill-defined— even in law, and thus widely misused. Projects including mining, ports, and greenfield development are cited as 'public purpose' projects. However, most of these projects benefit populations different from those that have to pay the price with the loss of their lands, livelihoods, food, health, security, and homes. In the majority of cases, due process is not followed, neither are human rights standards implemented. Generally, such processes are marked by the absence of human rights impact assessments, the full, free and prior informed consent of communities, and adequate resettlement and rehabilitation. In particular, the important principle of providing alternative 'land for land' is not respected. Women are the worst impacted by such processes. Land alienation is also the root cause of social conflict in many parts of the world but is not addressed, neither is the right to land of individuals and communities recognized by states.

### **5. Urban policy bias**

The fifth problem is the lack of adequate investment in rural development, leading to growing unemployment, insecurity, and forced migration. Furthermore, the global policy assumption that 'urbanization is inevitable' has led to a policy denial in addressing the structural causes of rampant urbanization and its ecological impacts. This has further led to an urban policy bias, with budgetary implications, that fails to adequately focus on and address the needs of rural people, who constitute half of humanity. This urban policy bias is also evident in the 2016 New Urban Agenda. Growing urban sprawl and the forced takeover of agricultural lands, further exacerbate the crisis of food security and food sovereignty.

## **Importance of this Declaration**

### **1. Focus on peasants and other rural communities**

This draft declaration, for the first time, recognizes the specific needs and persistent marginalisation of peasants and other rural communities, as a special constituency requiring urgent attention. It develops a human rights framework to protect them within a sustainable development and environmental paradigm. While collating existing international legal and normative standards

related to rural communities, it also aims to fill gaps in international law with new provisions. It is crucial to reversing the urban policy bias, and would also help to meet the gaps in the 2016 New Urban Agenda.

## **2. Recognition of the right to land**

A very important contribution of this declaration is that it calls for the recognition of the right to land, individually and collectively, of rural communities. This would build on and expand the scope of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as well as the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on Tenure. The stress on agrarian and land reform, and the inclusion of the principle of social function of land are very significant in ensuring the realization of the right of rural communities to live with dignity.

## **3. Human rights principles**

The explicit recognition of the principles of *food sovereignty* and of *free and prior informed consent*, as human rights principles in the declaration, is a positive and noteworthy achievement. It is also of fundamental importance to protecting the human rights of rural people.

## **4. Link to the Paris Agreement and 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda**

This declaration would help to meet implementation gaps in the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Rural people, while contributing the least to climate change with their low ecological footprints, unfortunately, bear the greatest brunt of its impacts. A human rights declaration focusing on the specific needs of rural communities would help protect their rights, including to disaster risk reduction, preparedness, and reconstruction and rehabilitation. While several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relate to land, food, water, social inequality, and poverty reduction, this declaration could help to contextualise them for rural people within a human rights-based framework for implementation and monitoring.

## **5. Global guidance and standard-setting tool**

The declaration would be useful in guiding international and national law and policy developments aimed at protecting rights of rural people. It could also help support some important processes underway within the UN human rights system, such as the proposed development of a general comment on business and human rights, and on the right to land by the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

### **Issues That Require Greater Focus in the Declaration**

#### **1. Prevention of Violations**

It would be useful if the declaration could strengthen the framework for prevention of violations. For instance, by including the need for human rights-based impact assessments before any projects are sanctioned in rural areas, and by developing early warning systems, including for conflict and agrarian crises. The declaration should also call for the regulation of macro-economic policies as well as trade and investment agreements to prevent human rights violations.

#### **2. Reparation and Restitution**

The declaration should address issues of non-recognition of rights and incorporate a stronger framework for restitution and reparation. This would include addressing issues of 'biopiracy' and

appropriation of traditional knowledge; including omitted groups such as internally displaced persons, refugees, people living under occupation and situations of armed conflict, and stateless persons; and incorporating international human rights standards on evictions, tenure security, internal displacement, disasters, resettlement, and rehabilitation.

### **3. Public Purpose**

A major achievement of this declaration would be if it could incorporate or request states to adopt a human rights-based definition of ‘public purpose’ that is compliant with the international human rights framework and aims to prevent human rights violations of one group for the benefit of another.

### **4. Climate Change**

A stronger human rights approach to addressing climate change and its impacts on peasants and other rural people would be useful. The declaration could include provisions that climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies of states must not, under any circumstances, violate human rights, and especially must not lead to forced evictions and displacement.

### **5. Women’s and Children’s Rights**

A greater focus on women’s rights and children’s rights throughout the text would strengthen the declaration. In particular, issues of child labour, exploitation, early/forced marriage, and rights of widows, single women, and other marginalized women should be addressed.

Once again, I would like to commend the Working Group for the excellent work done on drafting this historic declaration, and would like to urge all states to take this issue seriously and to work collaboratively towards finalizing the text and adopting the declaration soon. Rural peoples around the world cannot afford to wait any more for their rights to be respected, protected, and fulfilled.

Thank you very much.

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