

# UNDRIP: Shifting From Global Aspiration to Local Realization

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Indigenous people performing traditional dance. UN Photo/Patrick Benschmann

The core lesson in the creation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was simple: collective action by Indigenous peoples could force major changes in international law and national government policies. As late as 2000, the prospects for the draft declaration looked less than auspicious. It was not clear that the United Nations would approve a complex and politically-potent document. When it passed in 2007, four influential nations -- Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States -- held out, declaring that UNDRIP contradicted national policies and was impractical. The four countries capitulated in 2010 and UNDRIP was established as a key statement of international aspirations.

The process of improving conditions for Indigenous peoples has now moved to a different level. The common grievances and challenges have been articulated. The socio-economic and cultural problems of Indigenous have been described globally, really for the first time. There is a profoundly effective enumeration of expected rights and freedoms that Indigenous peoples believe are required if their languages, cultures and lifeways are to flourish. Now the attention turns to implementation and the operationalization of Indigenous aspirations.

Two things stand out with regards to this next stage. First, at both the national level and global level, nation states believe that the work of UNDRIP is done. The Declaration is recognized largely as a statement of what Indigenous peoples want and need, rather than a commitment by national governments to act. UNDRIP has been passed. Indigenous peoples have been recognized and governance goes on as usual. All observers of international affairs know that even such powerful UN documents as those relating to human rights, genocide, the rights of children and the like did not transform public affairs and policies over night. Indeed, many nations around the world continue to struggle with the official recognition and protection of the most fundamental rights. So it will be for UNDRIP.

The second element is from the Indigenous side of the equation. Brought together in the decades-long battle for global recognition, Indigenous peoples want, deserve and expect more. Many of the participants of the multi-decade long process of drafting UNDRIP believed that national governments and international agencies would move quickly to implement the implicit and explicit rights and strategies articulated in UNDRIP. That has not happened. Nor will it happen on its own, any more than other international declarations on human rights occurred in a step-wise fashion.

UNDRIP is, however, much more than a simple statement of aspirations. Instead, it is a powerful assertion by Indigenous peoples that they have survived, that they will survive, and that they insist on fair and just treatment by national governments and the international community at large. Handled properly, the mobilization and articulation of Indigenous aspirations could well prove to be a world-changing development.

The next step in the process requires deliberate steps to maintain international connections and global attention. Individual Indigenous political communities are currently working to implement UNDRIP on the national or regional level. As this struggle continues, empowered by the terms and processes of UNDRIP, it is vital that the Indigenous peoples as well as supporting organizations, national governments and international institutions pay close attention to local developments and share the lessons and insights gained from political and legal action.

As a technical document, UNDRIP is finished and the political work is done. As a road map for Indigenous communities determined to flourish and survive in a hitherto unwelcoming political context, UNDRIP is far from complete. What will happen in the coming years is that Indigenous groups will experience incremental success and significant set-backs.

The real lesson from UNDRIP is that shared stories carry substantial international weight. In the coming years, the real power of UNDRIP will lie in Indigenous peoples telling the world what has been accomplished, what crises continue, and what remains to be done. UNDRIP is an international governance vehicle with the potential to strengthen the collective action of an ever increasing international community of Indigenous peoples as they shift from global aspiration to local realization of their rights to autonomy, self-determination, and cultural survival.

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