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IIMA and VIDES at the UN

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A Quality Education for Indigenous Children in Latin and Central America: Venezuela, Mexico, Costa Rica and Panama

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the General Assembly on September 13, 2007, recognizes the right to receive education in the native language and affirms the crucial need for all societies to respect cultural differences.

IIMA and VIDES International share the view that effective implementation of this right is not possible without access to *quality education*. This implies overcoming the current reductive vision of a society where only the dominant culture is accepted. Instead, it is essential to recognize that indigenous cultures enhance the country's breadth and the world at large. For that reason, intercultural education should not be limited to indigenous peoples, but should involve everyone, thus building a culture that is respectful of diversity.

In this regard, IIMA and VIDES International present their project, which focuses on indigenous peoples in Venezuela, Mexico, Costa Rica and Panama; and strives to achieve three main objectives:

- ***To foster an educational process that accompanies, enhances and enriches indigenous children;***
- ***Support the creation of an intercultural society through an educational intervention aimed at exposing non-indigenous students to other cultures, and to an understanding of the richness found in their national cultural heritage;***
- ***Sharing best practices from actual experiences carried out by IIMA and VIDES International relating to the implementation of the right to education for indigenous peoples, while taking into account cultural specificities.***

The project took place from September 11th to 24th, 2010 at the IIMA Human Rights Office in Geneva and hosted six participants, consisting of: **M. Isabel Eguillor Garcia**, IIMA of Venezuela; **M. Antonieta Amazonas Azavache**, IIMA of Venezuela and member of “Bare” indigenous group; **M. Carmen Duran Calvo**, IIMA of Panama; **Edith Reyes Chavez**, IIMA of Mexico and member of “Mixe” indigenous group; **M. Concepcion Villagran Arrieta**, IIMA of Mexico; and **Ivania Villalobos**, VIDES volunteer from Costa Rica.





The training course offered the participants with instruction on the United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms, with a special focus on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. They had the opportunity to hear annual reports presented by several Special Procedures at the 15th session of the Human Rights Council. Additionally, they attended the 55th session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, including the review of Spain, Nicaragua and Sri Lanka. Four of the participants gave testimonials at the **side event** entitled **“The Quality Education for Indigenous Children in Latin and**

Central America” on September 21st, during the Human Rights Council.

The participants evaluated their experience in Geneva as “a great opportunity” to better understand the functioning of several United Nations mechanisms and their role in international law-making. IIMA and VIDES appreciated the chance to be enriched by the participants` insight into indigenous culture.

5th Training Course for Human Rights Defenders involved in implementing the Right to education for indigenous peoples

The 5th training course took place from 12th to 24th September 2010 at the IIMA Human Rights Office in Geneva.

The training course aimed at preparing the participants to collect and transfer information from the office in Geneva to use within the UN mechanisms for the promotion and protection of Human Rights. This event was focused on UN policies and declarations, especially on the “Rights of the Indigenous People,” the main topic of the project. Another objective was to make participants aware of the importance of their contribution to obtain the realization of effective advocacy.



Sr. MariaGrazia Caputo
Director of IIMA

Sr. **MariaGrazia Caputo**, director of the IIMA Human Rights Office, presented all activities and initiatives that have been carried out the past three years of the office`s existence, stressing the key role played by the Office in bringing to the attention of several UN bodies the reality and needs of those living in difficult situations. The IIMA Human Rights Office intensively worked to make IIMA and VIDES Human Rights Defenders aware of the benefits of getting involved in UN activities. While accomplishing these tasks, she also underlined the significance of the interaction with the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Committee on the Rights of the Child representative, Ms. Rosa Maria Ortiz.

The course also included special participant Sr. **Leonor Salazar**, General Director of VIDES INTERNATIONAL who presented the organization born from the inspiration of the Salesian Sisters. VIDES INTERNATIONAL is composed of young volunteers who serve children and protect their rights all over the world. The strong link between IIMA and VIDES reflects the close collaboration between the Sisters and young volunteers in carrying out many activities for the promotion and protection of Human Rights worldwide. In this regard, the six participants shared their personal experience of collaborating with volunteers and expressed sincere gratitude for their work which has allowed for concrete advancement in the indigenous regions of Central and Latin America.

The theoretical section of the training dealt with the Human Rights Council`s composition and importance, and its mechanisms to guarantee human rights, in particular the



Leonor Salazar
VIDES International General
Director

Universal Periodic Review. It also presented the role of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and examined the UN Treaties System, especially the Convention on the Rights of the Child, its two Optional Protocols and its ensuing Committee (CRC).



The practical section of the training course involved attending the 15th session of the Human Rights Council and the 55th session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The participants heard the annual reports presented by several special procedures and their subsequent interactive dialogue, in particular the report by the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of the Indigenous People.

During this period in Geneva, participants had the opportunity to have several noteworthy meetings, which included other NGO representatives committed in this field, such as BICE (Bureau International Catholique de l'Enfance), and the Ambassadors of their respective countries. The Ambassadors graciously listened to the participants as they shared their experience as well as future projects that will guarantee a quality education for Indigenous Children of Central and Latin America.

Finally, IIMA and VIDES Human Rights defenders had a meeting with **Ms. Claire Charters**, Human Rights Officer (OHCHR), during which she explained the relevant role of the Office for the promotion and protection of Human Rights. She focused on the rights of Indigenous Peoples and described how those working on the ground can report concrete violations to the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and, consequently, give an important contribution in protecting these rights. To train them in these reporting activities, participants performed exercises to identify critical situations concerning the human rights in their countries, to provide relevant information, and to draft possible statements to UN mechanisms.



Ms. Claire Charters
OHCHR

Side event September 21st, 2010 Quality Education for Indigenous Children in Latin and South America

On the occasion of the 15th Session of the Human Rights Council which took place from September 13 to October 1, 2010, Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice (IIMA) held a new Parallel Event entitled: ***"The Right to a Quality Education for Indigenous Children in Latin and Central America."*** The event, realized in collaboration with VIDES International, was co-sponsored by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Permanent Missions of Mexico and Costa Rica.



The Parallel Event, held on September 21st in Palais de Nations, was moderated by Ms.

María Francisca Ize-Charrin, former Director of the Field Operations and Technical Cooperation Division of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Participants attending the meeting included the Permanent Missions of Latin American countries, UN Officers and other NGOs members.

The main goal of the event was to give the opportunity to IIMA and VIDES members from Costa Rica, Venezuela, Panama and Mexico to share best practices in the education of indigenous children. In fact, all the presentations demonstrated the



necessity to create a specific educational system for all indigenous communities in order to:

- Adapt the national educational system to the special needs and culture of indigenous children;
- Facilitate the integral development of indigenous children;
- Facilitate the access of indigenous students to higher educational levels;
- Implement and improve the presence of indigenous girls in school.

The methodology employed in the debate consisted of “positive denunciation” through the presentation of best practices and successful experiences carried out by IIMA and VIDES worldwide.

The side even enjoyed the presence of important panelists and qualified members of IIMA and VIDES coming from Costa Rica, Venezuela, Panama and Mexico.



Ms. **Leonor Salazar Garcia**, General Director of VIDES International, opened the Panel by presenting the focal role of education in IIMA and VIDES activities. As she affirmed, the education is the basic instrument to support the integral development of a person, especially a child, as well as the best way to guarantee security and peace in a country. This can only be realized with the collaboration of several actors comprising of government, families, civil society and individuals. She specified that in an indigenous context “quality education” is an education based on the respect of the indigenous culture, language and traditions. Its aim is to guarantee intellectual, emotional and social development, thus making Indigenous

children proud of their origins.

The second panellist, Ms. **Maria Clara Martin**, Chief of the Americans Section, Field Operations and Technical Cooperation Division of the OHCHR, underlined the connection between low education and poverty, clarifying that in Latin America Countries Indigenous people are poorer and more disadvantaged compared to the rest of the population. She pointed out the existence of discriminations into indigenous communities concerning women and children. She recommended to the present Governments, who, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 28) and the International Covenant on Economical Social and Cultural Rights (art. 13), might take all measures to guarantee equal access to education for indigenous children, free from discrimination, and provide the primary school programme in a minimum of two languages.



The following speaker was **Rosa Maria Ortiz**, Deputy President of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. She focused attention on the two elements that formulate a quality education: right and culture. She explained that a quality education for indigenous children would involve engaging teachers, educators, families, institutions and students in the decision-making process of adapting the traditional educational system with the specific culture and needs of indigenous peoples. Furthermore, she pointed out that her hope is for governments to guarantee access to school for every child and facilitate the respect of Indigenous cultures.

After these introductory statements IIMA and VIDES representatives presented their experiences with Indigenous *Mixes, Chinantecas e Zapotecas* (Messico), *Yanomami* (Venezuela), *Emberà, Wounaan, Kuna* (Panamà) and *BriBri* (Costa Rica). The permanent representatives to the United Nations from these countries were given the right of reply after the each statement by the IIMA or VIDES participant.

The first human rights defender who took the floor was Ms. **Ivania Villalobos** from VIDES Costa Rica. Ivania presented her experience with the Indigenous *Bribri* who live on the Talamanca Reserve. VIDES Costa Rica started its activities in this region in 2002, addressing young people and volunteers belonging to indigenous and non-indigenous groups. VIDES activities (seminars, meetings, volunteer camps, etc.) exhort young people to socialize and reflect on important issues such as human rights, intercultural dialogue, and peace. These activities reach two important objectives: Indigenous children rediscover their



own culture and non-indigenous children encounter a new culture and acknowledge it as part of their own story.

The Ambassador of Costa Rica, H.E. Mr. **Christian GUILLERMET FERNANDEZ**, showed his gratitude to Ivania and VIDES Costa Rica for their impressive work. He recognized that Costa Rica has several difficulties to face and one of the most effective methods in solving them could be to guarantee the right to education for all. Moreover, he underlined that it is necessary to ensure a quality education both for students and educators.



The follower speaker, Ms. **Edith REYES CHÀVEZ**, member of the Indigenous *Mixe*, illustrated the actions of IIMA with indigenous *Cjinantecos*, *Mixes* and *Zapoteccos* in Mexico.

Edith, after a brief presentation of the three groups, focused the attention on the activities and results obtained by IIMA members in the CECACHI (Centro Educativo Cultural Agropecuario Chinanteco). This secondary school is attended by both indigenous and non-indigenous children, and not only offers formal education but also the valorisation of the indigenous culture. In fact, the centre provides many activities addressed specifically to indigenous children but many non-indigenous students participate voluntarily. In order to transfer indigenous culture in a systematic way, IIMA members in collaboration with indigenous educators

created an alphabet, educational materials and a specific learning method compatible with the culture. The informal activities performed in a multicultural context allow children to rediscover the richness of the indigenous culture as part of their country's culture.

The representative of Mexico, Ms. **Mariana OLIVERA WEST** was surprised by the quality and effectiveness of IIMA activities with these indigenous groups. She affirmed the importance of improving the indigenous culture in Mexico, and also recognized that the government has to take more measures to reach this objective. For this reason the government should sustain organizations like IIMA and VIDES and at the same time should provide a quality education at all levels: for students, through a bilingual education in primary school and trilingual education in the secondary school, and for educators, through training courses on indigenous culture and human rights.



Ms. **Maria del Carmen DURÀN CALVO** from Panama illustrated her experience with indigenous children from *Emberà*, *Wounaan* and *Kuna* groups. She described the formal and informal educational activities carried out by IIMA aimed at promoting the integral development of children. Furthermore, she highlighted the legal and health assistance activities realized by IIMA in collaboration with indigenous educators and operators. Finally, she presented the results obtained like the rediscovery of the indigenous culture by indigenous and non-indigenous children.

The last Human Rights Defender, Ms. **Maria Antonieta AMAZONAS AZAVACHE**, presented her long-standing experience with the *Yanomami* people in Venezuela. IIMA has been present in the Amazonia region since 1960 and as a result IIMA has become part of the *Yanomami* community. After a long process of mutual understanding, IIMA and Indigenous members collaborated to create a new learning system based on *Yanomami* culture. In fact, they produced a new alphabet, several specific materials, and a methodology that allow indigenous children to express their language in a written form. Now the *Yanomami* are able to share their language and culture both within the group and outside of the community.





The last speaker was the Ambassador of Venezuela, H.E. Mr. **Germán Mundaraín HERNÁNDEZ**, who expressed his surprise and appreciation for the great job carried out by IIMA in his country. He recognized that the government should take IIMA as a positive model for the quality education and admitted the necessity of the government to be more involved in providing support to guarantee a quality education for indigenous children, in order to facilitate their integral development.

The side event concluded with great satisfaction from participants and organizers because of the richness of testimonies coming from the Human Rights Defenders and the sincere presentations from the government representatives. It illustrated the basis of effectiveness that can be achieved through future collaborations in the field of indigenous children's education.

The training course seen by participants

At the conclusion of the training course, all the participants shared their opinions about their experience in Geneva.

Sr. Maria del Carmen Duran Calvo, Panama. "Throughout the course, nothing was improvised; the information provided during the training course was well prepared. The possibility to learn how to express our work through the proper human rights language and to interact with other people committed in this field made this an amazing once-in-a-lifetime experience. I have realized what the specific roles of IIMA and VIDES International are in the mission for Human Rights through the Office based in Geneva. IIMA and VIDES International are shining lights on a hill, and the two of them together are working hard towards building a better future for the most disadvantaged."

Sr. Isabel Eguillor, Venezuela. "It was a magnificent opportunity; the training was very well organized, and allowed us to learn a wide variety of Human Rights vocabulary and content. It also provided us with information about contributing to the implementation of human rights through a positive denunciation. Moreover, I truly appreciate the possibility of exchanging views with our States representatives as well as with UN experts during and after the side event."

Sr. Conception Villagran, Mexico. "I commend the preparation made by Sr. Maria Grazia, Sr. Leonor and the young people working in this office for the training course. I appreciated the work done by IIMA and VIDES International in offering "The Quality Education of Indigenous Children" workshop. I was grateful for being able to participate in the training course and side event. Another great opportunity was the chance to meet the Ambassadors from our respective countries and other UN experts on Education and Indigenous issues."

Ivania Villalobos, Costa Rica. "I received further clarification on the United Nations mechanisms for the defense of Human Rights. I deepened my knowledge of indigenous' rights and learned how to provide pertinent and comprehensive information to IIMA and the VIDES Human Rights Office in order to enhance its work with the UN bodies. The course was a good balance of theoretical ideas and practical applications. I would have liked to spend more days here."

Sr. Edith Reyes Chavez, Mexico. "Although the training course only lasted two weeks, it allowed us to fully understand the work that the Office has carried out since its creation in 2007. The course had clear objectives and methodology. I had the opportunity to understand the way in which IIMA has been involved in Human Rights, and especially in the protection of the right to education. I am very grateful to IIMA for increasing our knowledge on this issue. The methodology of the positive denunciation and the sharing of good practices have been enlightening and I will be sure to share them with my community. Thanks!"

Sr. Maria Antonieta Amazonas, Venezuela. "I realized the important role of NGOs to facilitate and make the actions of the United Nations more effective. Consequently, I feel that our work as Human Rights Defenders contributes to the realization of a wider mission. Concerning the specific focus of this training, I think that, although there was limited time, the project's goals were fully achieved and the intellectual sharing was of high quality. Knowledge is power."

Special Rapporteur and Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Hardships facing indigenous people around the globe were brought to the forefront of the 15th session of the Human Rights Council with presentations by the Special Rapporteur, and the Expert Mechanism, supported by the Office of the High Commissioner on September 20, 2010. The major issues for these groups include insufficient protection of land rights by States and their limited ability to participate in governance. Additionally, in isolated regions, children face difficulty in getting to school because of lack of sufficient transportation.

Regardless of the efforts made by States to promote the cultures, traditions and rights of these groups; discrimination and in some cases violence against indigenous peoples, including children, still exist.

In his presentation the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People, Mr. James Anaya, found many countries do not have strict enough policies for the indigenous populations to retain and/or recover their ancestral land.

Several enterprises have invaded the indigenous people's lands and this has forced these groups to evacuate.

Governments have been unable to prevent these violations from occurring due to inadequate legislation.

According to the Special Rapporteur, it is important laws in regards to Human Rights of Indigenous People. States will be essential in ensuring corporations are in conformance with the standards set out by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In Mr. Anaya's annual report, he also discussed the indigenous people's right to participate in decision-making. Indigenous groups have the right to be properly informed and consulted when legislation and other important resolutions are being developed. An increased level of communication between indigenous peoples, corporations, and governments is crucial for the decision-making process to be fair.

The Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous People reported the summary of their annual meeting that was held in July of this year. This 3rd session included 600 accredited participants who provided input on the rights for indigenous peoples. In their statement on Tuesday, September 21st, the experts proposed to create panel events in future sessions of the Human Rights Council to discuss indigenous issues. The first panel event should include a follow up on the execution of last year's study on indigenous peoples right to education. Furthermore, the proposition was made for States to encourage national human rights institutions to promote and monitor compliance with the UN Declaration.

As affirmed by the Special Rapporteur, there is widespread need for awareness of indigenous people's issues; including the right to self-determination, agreement and consent. In order for further progress to be made, close collaboration and fruitful communication between indigenous peoples, governments and UN mechanisms will be critical.

The Commission on Human Rights appointed the *Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people* in 2001, as part of the system of thematic Special Procedures. Their mandate includes promoting good practices, including new laws, government programs, and constructive agreements between indigenous peoples and states, constructing reports on situations in specific countries and specific alleged violations

The United Nations *Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* was established by the United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 6/36 in 2007. The Mechanism which is made-up of five experts, including indigenous persons, serves as an advisory body to the Human Rights Council. It provides expertise on issues related to indigenous peoples' rights, mainly through studies, as requested. It may also make proposals for the Council's consideration.

Special Rapporteur on Children and Armed Conflict

On 14 September, on the occasion of the IIMA 15th Session of the Human Rights Council, IIMA attended the presentation of the Report of Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Rapporteur on Children and Armed Conflict.

The Special Rapporteur discussed her previous year's work on the investigation of children's rights in countries affected by armed conflicts. Her report focused on the violations of children's rights and on the situation of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), of which more than half are children.

IDPs are persons who were forced to leave their hometown and live in another part of the country. Many of them are forced to dwell in refugee or IDPs camps. Because of their vulnerability, the children in these camps are often recruited for armed combat by military groups. Internally displaced children are also at increased risk of suffering from rape and other forms of sexual violence in the camps, or during flight, as they are preyed upon by soldiers, armed groups, traffickers, border guards and other opportunists. These are serious violations against the universal right to security and safety for children. Furthermore, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy focused on the violation of the right to education for all children, especially those living in IDPs camps or in the midst of violent conflict.

The Special Rapporteur followed reporting the situation of some countries she visited. She affirmed that the current situation of children in armed conflict in Sri Lanka and Nepal has improved thanks to the work of the OHCHR to reunite children with their families and to return them to their homeland. Other countries including Sudan, Uganda, and Afghanistan have made the initial steps to improving the lives of their children.

The Optional Protocol (OP) of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, adopted in 2000, establishes the age of 18 as the minimum age for participation in hostilities and compulsory recruitment. Every country was invited to sign this Protocol to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 18 are not compulsorily recruited into the armed forces. Today, a total of 36 countries have neither signed, ratified nor acceded to the Optional Protocol, while 24 countries have signed the Optional Protocol but not yet ratified it.

During the interactive dialogue, that followed the speech of the SR, State representatives and NGOs asserted the necessity to intervene in countries affected by conflicts in order to protect children who return to their hometown providing sufficient clean water, health care and education.

The Special Rapporteur and all dignitaries encouraged with a strong voice all countries to sign the OP as well as to enact national legislation that explicitly prohibits and criminalizes the recruitment of children into armed forces or groups and their use in hostilities.

A Blog for IIMA Human Rights Office

If you are interested in receiving more information on IIMA Human Rights Office activities you can consult our Blog:

<http://dirittiumanifma.blogspot.com/>

And if you are interested in FMA activities come to visit our website:

www.cgfmanet.org



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