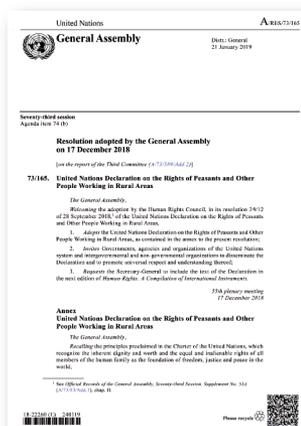


María E. Fernandez

UNDROP – The United Nations declaration on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas

The UNDROP Declaration¹ adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 17, 2018 reaffirms the UN Declarations on the right to development², the rights of indigenous peoples³ and the universality of all human rights. It recognises the special relationship and interaction among peasants and other groups working in rural areas and their contribution to conserving and improving biodiversity as well as their own and world-wide food security.

Article 1 of the Declaration defines peasants as any person who engages in small-scale agricultural production for subsistence and/or for the market, who relies significantly on family, household or other non-monetarized labour and who has a special dependency on the land.



It recognises that peasants and people working in rural areas, including youth and the ageing, are migrating to urban areas due to a lack of incentives and the drudgery of rural life, due to insecure land tenure, discrimination and the lack of access to productive resources, financial services and information. The Declaration is based on a concern that peasants and rural workers are burdened with environmental degradation and climate change and suffer disproportionately from poverty, hunger and malnutrition. This Declaration is an important contribution to the advancement of a paradigm for development where the agency of peasants, indigenous and forest peoples is at its foundation.

The International Assessment of Knowledge, Science and Technology for Agricultural Development (IAASTD)⁴ focuses on the contribution of agricultural science and technology to poverty reduction. The findings assess challenges to be met if the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG)⁵ are to be achieved. Our purpose here is to explore how UNDROP reinforces the IAASTD findings and how it can strengthen efforts to reach the 2030 SDGs in rural areas.

2018 UN Declaration

Key findings of the IAASTD related to small-scale agriculture and rural communities are directly related to articles in UNDRDP. These include:

- the rural population has benefited unevenly from the benefits of production increases;
- many challenges in agriculture will require new strategies that integrate knowledge and technology from the scientific community with that of traditional heritages and local experience to enhance innovation;
- Innovative institutional mechanisms will be required to facilitate the design, adaptation and management of agricultural systems that are ecologically and socially sustainable.

The focus of UNDRDP

The Declaration makes explicit that “peasants and other people working in rural areas” have the same rights as the rest of the world’s citizenry and that they have a critical role in managing natural resources for food and agriculture and for ensuring food security toward 2050. Specific articles that can sustain, support and complement the findings of the IAASTD include:

- **Consultation in policy design** (*Article 2.3*): States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with peasants and other people working in rural areas through their own representative institutions, engaging with and seeking the support of those who could be affected by decisions before they are made;
- **Women’s rights** (*Article 4.2*): States shall ensure that peasant women and other women working in rural areas enjoy, without discrimination, all the human rights and fundamental freedoms including: training and education; equal access to financial services, marketing facilities and appropriate technology. They will also be ensured equal access to land and natural resources and equal or priority treatment in land and agrarian reform and land resettlement schemes;
- **Organization and Collective bargaining** (*Article 9.1*): Peasants and rural workers have the right to form and join organizations, trade unions, cooperatives or any other organization or association of their own choosing for the protection of their interests, and to bargain collectively;
- **Food Sovereignty** (*Article 15.4*): Peasants and rural workers have the right to determine their own food and agriculture systems (recognized by many States and regions as the right to food sovereignty). This includes the right to participate in decision-making processes on food and agriculture policy and the right to healthy and adequate food, produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods that respect their cultures.

- **Control over seeds technology and medicine** (*Article 19*): Peasants and rural workers have the right to seeds, the right to the protection of traditional knowledge relevant to plant genetic resources for food and agriculture and the right to equitably participate in sharing the benefits arising from the utilisation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture.

Implications of the UN Declaration on challenges identified by the IAASTD

There is no doubt that UNDROP speaks directly to the key findings of the IAASTD. It makes clear that we can no longer look at peasants, indigenous or rural people, foresters or fisherfolk as outsiders or incidental interest groups. They are now, by an international decision, to be guaranteed by all signatories to the UN Charter the same rights that all farmers, small, medium and large-scale, have. As a result, UN Member States are specifically charged with focusing urgently on peasants and other rural people in a different manner than has been customary in many cases. Those states concerned with sustainable agricultural development, have committed themselves further to take measures to:

- Develop new strategies for natural resource and agricultural management to integrate knowledge and technology from the scientific community, traditional heritages, and local experience, in a joint effort with the rural population.
- Innovative institutional mechanisms to facilitate the design, adaptation and adoption of ecologically and socially sustainable agricultural systems need to be designed in a participatory manner, at national and local levels.
- Design and implement processes of consultation that reinforce existing, traditional organizations; increase their representation in local and national fora while encouraging their inclusion of women in leadership. Recognition of collective land rights and diverse resource management systems.
- Foster periodic events at local, state and national level that give public recognition to the historical and continuing role in land, forest and biodiversity management that explicitly “award” contributions of rural people – men and women – to knowledge and technology generation.

Below are two examples of efforts to support rural communities in the management of natural resources upon which they – and we – depend.

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Guatemala: Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP)⁶

The Association of Forest Communities of Petén was founded in 1997. By 2000 its support to rural communities in the Petén had resulted in a 25 to 40 year concession by the government allowing for community management of some 500,000 hectares of forests located in the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR). For more than two decades, ACOFOP has worked to develop a sustainable and comprehensive forest management model, through which successful companies have been created in the certified timber market, as well as in the commercialisation of non-timber forest products, such as palm of xate, honey, chewing gum and Ramón seed. It also ventures into the tourism sector through the provision of guidance services in the different heritage sites.

Strategies devised as part of the politics of participation practised by ACOFOP include the provision of direct funding to community institutions and enabling community forestry entities to gather information, monitor progress and diagnose their own issues. The objective is to cultivate learning communities with cultures of questioning that actively include women and especially young people. Their Accompaniment strategy is not about "helping" poor forest communities, but focuses on the collectivisation of claims to tenure and of capacities to meet the technical and legal demands of community forestry. An implicit principle of "Accompaniment" is that of learning while complex socio-cultural negotiation is taking place at every scale.

The communities who are members of ACOFOP have faced constant challenges over the years including: conflict between the rights of community members and non-members; failure of member communities to fulfil obligations and how to deal with the apparent absence of state support while faced with the incursion of illegal land appropriations for the establishment of cattle ranches affecting 30 to 50% of the concessionary. ACOFOP fostered alliances at national and international level, enabling effective campaigning which in turn guaranteed a renewal of the concessions in 2021.⁷

As Milner et.al. (2019) have pointed out, successful community forestry in the Maya Biosphere Reserve is tied to the development of institutions that learn through negotiation, and embed learning into their regulatory practices. Each area of negotiation involves navigating specific tensions; between keeping rules and changing them; between establishing unity and linking diverse interests; between listening carefully and speaking persuasively; between defending territorial rights and addressing internal power dynamics. These tensions constantly threaten to undo the possibility of collective action, but they also keep participation open, fostering inquiries that lead to enhanced participation.

CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry⁸

In 2012, the Forest Genetic Resources team at Bioversity International carried out a centre-wide assessment of its capacity to carry out gender-sensitive research to identify policies, technologies and practices that contribute to enhanced gender equity in access, use and management of forests and trees, and the distribution of associated benefits internationally.⁹

In parallel, it carried out a Gender Fellowship Program that supported three female and two male researchers from West and Central Africa, and Central, South, and Southeast Asia with research grants, capacity strengthening workshops (in theory, methods and use of tools) and mentoring.¹⁰ Below we share a window into the use of gender-responsive participatory research by one of the fellows:

In the Central Western Ghats of India forests are owned by the state Forest Department (FD) and can be classified as protected forest, reserve forest and minor forests. Degraded forests in reserve forest and minor forest zones are managed by Village Forest Committees. These are registered organizations that bring together the FD with local communities under India's Joint Forest Management program. The research was carried out in three villages with high forest cover; because of the wide variety of non-timber forest products used by the communities, their large sociocultural and ethnic diversity, high local dependency on forest resources and villagers' willingness to participate in the research.

UN Member States are now charged with focusing on peasants and rural workers in a different manner than before.

Women and men participants from three villages actively engaged in knowledge mapping activities. Participants found the competitive angle of identifying which groups had most knowledge about the different topics identifies particularly motivation. They were keen to complete the exercises even when these took over 2 hours. Additionally, many participants from disadvantaged ethnic groups as well as illiterate and younger women explained that it was their first experience speaking in front of a mixed gender and multi-ethnic group in plenary. An elder woman from the Naik community in Salkani explained that, 'this is the first time that most of us, both men and women, spoke out in front of a group of people. Initially we were shy and hesitant, but after a while it brought out confidence within and among us.' Participants expressed that bringing differentiated sets of knowledge together increased the knowledge held individually and collectively, ensured that different perspectives could be recognised and valued, and provided a more comprehensive picture of the breadth of local knowledge on NFTs.

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Suggestions on how to move forward

These examples allude to both the advantages of working with differentiated gender, age, cast and ethnic groups in a process of social learning that can enrich policy and research agendas that respect the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other People Working in Rural Areas as well as the challenges that representation, consultation and participation imply. For those of us who acknowledge the need for a development paradigm shift, these challenges will include questioning one's own professional training and risking professional credibility among those colleagues determined to remain part of the status quo. The task at hand requires us to continue to facilitate actions being taken internationally as well as at state, regional, and community levels in a masterful interdisciplinary and inter-institutional effort. Specific actions require:

- Building institutional capacity to do gender-responsive participatory research and consultation at all levels;
- Carrying out systematic consultation with organised rural people and their representatives in policy design;
- Increasing access by women to land, information, educational services and representation in community, regional and national organizations;
- Supporting the recognition and strengthening of community organizations respecting their history and socio-cultural factors that affect their processes and procedures for participation and decision-making;
- Creating mechanisms whereby rural people can participate in policy-making decisions;
- Protecting customary land rights and collective natural resource management systems;
- Documenting and providing public recognition for traditional knowledge relevant to the management of plant genetic resources;
- Increasing the distribution of the benefits from plant genetic resource use among those who have generated and cared for them historically.

One of the most important challenges we face is to provide opportunities for small farmers to have a significant voice at the table as we look for ways to design and implement policies that effectively bring us to more sustainable food production for the future. In Peru last year, 32,000 small farmers made their voice heard and the Congress passed a law recognising them as certified ecological producers. One year later however, the law is yet to be implemented as

larger and more powerful and uncertified farmers have been able to slow down the process. Over the past ten years we have come a long way in building support for a more sustainable resource management agenda. We will need to find better ways to allow the voices of smaller farmers, fisherfolk and indigenous communities to be heard.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://undocs.org/pdf/symbol=en/A/RES/73/165>
- 2 <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/rtd.pdf>
- 3 https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf
- 4 <https://www.weltagrarbericht.de/fileadmin/files/weltagrarbericht/IAASTDBerichte/SynthesisReport.pdf>
- 5 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>
- 6 <https://acofop.org/en/>
- 7 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305750X19303924?dgcid=coauthor>
- 8 <https://www.cgjar.org/research/program-platform/forests-trees-and-agroforestry/>
- 9 2012 Fernandez, M.E; (unpublished) Rome, Bioersity Internacional
- 10 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14728028.2016.1247753>



María Fernandez was a member of the Scenario research group for the IAASTD. She has been an Honorary Research Fellow at Bioersity Internacional in Rome and a Visiting Professor at the National University Rodriguez de Montoya in Amazonas, Peru. María Fernandez is an independent consultant active with the International Support Group (<https://isginternational.org>) of which she is a founding member. Her areas of special expertise include: stakeholder participation, gender relations in agriculture and natural resource management.