

Forum: General Assembly 2 (GA2)

Issue: Economic empowerment of indigenous communities through heritage industries

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Introduction

The economic empowerment of Indigenous communities serves to achieve the goals of: equality, sustainable development, and human rights. Indigenous people represent about “6 % of the global population (476 million in some 90 countries), Indigenous Peoples are also three times as likely to be living in extreme poverty.” based on OHCHR .They also face problems like land disenfranchisement and economic marginalisation. Heritage industries such as craftwork, cultural ecotourism and traditional medicine offer a sustainable economic model where communities can monetize their traditional knowledge and Traditional Cultural Expressions while still keeping distinct intellectual property rights.

Indigenous communities have been often oppressed by colonial powers through displacement, cultural erasure, indoctrination and others. These problems continue to plague our society and as such they need to be addressed and through Heritage Industries it helps to bridge the systemic gap.

Definition of Key Terms

Indigenous Peoples

Distinct social and cultural groups sharing ancestral ties to land and natural resources where they live or have been displaced.

Heritage Industries

The business of managing places that are important to an area's history and encouraging people to visit them.

Traditional Knowledge & Traditional Cultural Expressions

The accumulated wisdom, practices, skills, and artistic forms developed, sustained, and passed down through generations within indigenous and local communities.

Background Information

Historical Roots and Systematic Marginalisation

The economic isolation of Indigenous people is based on centuries of colonialism expansion and interference through the appropriation of their lands and cultures. They disrupted indigenous systems of trade built with sustainable use of resources, collective stewardship and localised trade networks. During this period, assimilationist measures across the Americas, Australia, and Africa deprived Indigenous peoples of land rights, language, and practices and threw them into economic isolation.

Today, Indigenous peoples represent about 6% of the world's population (476 million people) in 90 countries and nearly 19% of the world's extreme poor. In addition, official statistics by the World Bank indicate that Indigenous people are nearly three times more likely to be living in extreme poverty than non-Indigenous people. The historic legacy has impeded participation in the formal economy by restricting access to banking and financial credit. There is also the challenge of having inadequate physical and digital infrastructure in rural areas. There is frequent institutional discrimination in international trading networks. This is due to areas and regions having restricted access or laws designed to help the environment, or their culture making it harder for them to continue their traditions. It is also because there is still a significant impoverished indigenous majority leading to digital divide.

Emergence and Structure of Heritage Industries

Heritage industries have developed as a vital means towards sustainable economic self-determination in the face of continuing socioeconomic marginalisation. Cultural industries are commercial activities that are based on the cultural identity and traditional knowledge (TK) of communities. The heritage enterprise enables Indigenous people to engage in the market of their own intangible and tangible cultural expressions, generating essential local employment and cultural preservation.

In addition to making money, these areas offer social benefits by giving families a reason to work together economically. Young people are taught how to make items, share old stories and speak their native languages with the help of older members of the tribe. This helps to avoid cultural erasure over time.

Exploitation, Counterfeiting, and Intellectual Property Vulnerabilities

Despite its promise, Indigenous heritage industries suffer deep structural exploitation in worldwide consumer markets. Mass-produced goods are counterfeited in factories abroad and shipped into tourist markets. This harms authentic Indigenous artisans who craft items by hand with traditional time-consuming techniques.

A main reason for this vulnerability is the mismatch between intellectual property laws and Indigenous ownership rules. Normal IP laws, like patents, copyrights and

trademarks were made to protect a single commercial invention from a more clearly delimited item rather than the comprehensiveness of a culture. By contrast Indigenous traditional cultural expressions are owned by the community kept in trust, for generations and always changing. Because of this outside businesses often take symbols, traditional designs and ecological knowledge without getting the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) from the community or setting up fair sharing of benefits.

Major Recent Developments

In recent years, rapid digital expansion and e-commerce platforms have created both dynamic opportunities and increased risks for Indigenous creators. While online platforms enable independent artists to bypass exploitative intermediaries and sell directly to global consumer markets, they have simultaneously facilitated widespread digital design theft and unauthorized commercial mass reproduction.

At the same time, growing global consumer demand for ethically sourced and environmentally sustainable products has expanded market opportunities for Indigenous agro-ecological goods and cultural tourism. Regulatory innovations, such as Geographical Indications and official authenticity certification marks for example, Australia's Indigenous Art Code and New Zealand's Toi Iho trademark, have gained momentum as effective legal tools to verify genuine goods, protect market integrity, and combat illicit counterfeit imports.

Organisations and Major Countries Involved

WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization)

WIPO is in charge of creating and guiding legal rules that protect traditional knowledge from being stolen or sold without permission. WIPO's 2024 treaty is a key step: mandates patent applicants to disclose genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, ensuring indigenous creators retain ownership and credit. WIPO also offers help guiding communities through the process of setting up legal tools such as geographical indications and collective trademarks. These tools allow communities to protect their cultural products and compete fairly in an international market.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)

UNESCO, protects cultural heritage worldwide and supports local and traditional artists. By using its cultural diversity conventions UNESCO helps indigenous communities

set up cultural enterprises. It stops large-scale exploitation of traditions and makes sure that economic benefits flow directly back into the communities. UNESCO opens doors to markets and offers educational tools so that generational craftsmanship techniques do not disappear.

UNPFII (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues)

Serves as the level advisory body to the UN Economic and Social Council regarding indigenous rights, economic development and cultural protection. It elevates leaders to directly shape global policy agendas and highlight economic inequalities. The forum advocates for policy changes that protect traditional knowledge, eliminate barriers to capital for indigenous entrepreneurs and ensure that global development frameworks align with indigenous rights and community-led economic strategies.

Australia

Actively confronts a million dollar counterfeit art markets that threaten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander livelihoods. The government supports authenticity codes and certification marks to help consumers identify genuine indigenous artworks. Through national legislation Australia works to protect indigenous visual arts from offshore imitation funding local art centres that provide sustainable employment and secure fair market value for indigenous artists across remote and urban regions.

Bolivia

Integrates indigenous economic autonomy into its national constitution serving as a structural model for state-level support. The government funds state initiatives, credit networks and agricultural programs supporting textile weavers, traditional farmers and eco-tourism collectives. Bolivia actively promotes indigenous-led trade models that prioritize ownership, ecological sustainability and local market sovereignty allowing rural indigenous populations to monetize their heritage traditions while preserving their foundational cultural values.

Canada

Advances economic reconciliation programs aimed at expanding capital access for First Nations, Inuit and Métis heritage businesses. The government supports indigenous-led institutions, tourism associations and trade networks to help local entrepreneurs scale up their operations. Despite lingering geographical challenges in remote territories; Canada continues developing policies that foster indigenous business ownership, protect traditional cultural expressions and increase access to national and international trade networks.

Possible Solutions

To truly help indigenous communities and give Indigenous creators lasting economic power, action must be taken to put in place clear and usable steps at the global, national and local levels.

Examples of action such as United Nations General Assembly Resolution 61/295 (UNDRIP) especially Article 31 a part of strong national laws. This prompts Member States to build domestic Intellectual Property (IP) laws that give collective trademark protection Geographical Indications (GIs) and unique rights that fit traditional cultural expressions (TCEs) and traditional knowledge (TK). These new laws let Indigenous communities keep control over how Indigenous creators license, sell and stop unapproved copying or cultural taking of Indigenous creators' traditional arts, textiles and medicines.

To fight the spread of fake items in local markets governments must work with Indigenous advisory boards to start national certification and authentication trade marks just like Australia's NIACA model. It consists of certifications for indigenous artists and art to protect their creations. With tight border checks and customs enforcement under regional trade deals these programs help ensure authenticity and not be drowned out by competitors.

Financial help should grow by using micro-finance projects, low-interest seed grants and community-run business incubators that partner with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). These projects should give learning, online shop tools and supply chain help to remote communities. This allows for indigenous people to sell directly to the international market rather than needing an intermediary step.

Tourism ministries must require that every cultural and eco-tourism business, inside territories, follow the rule of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). By forcing joint-venture rules, host communities keep control of communities' stories and get a clear slice of tourism money. This money can then feed into training schools that keep crafting skills and spoken languages alive for the next generations.

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