

---

## **Conférence internationale : "Education, Learning and Indigenous Peoples' Rights : What knowledge, skills and languages for sustainable livelihoods ?- Tromsø, Norvège, 2-4 Avril 2014.**

*mercredi, 2 avril 2014*

COMPTE-RENDU de la conférence (anglais) : "Education, Learning and Indigenous Peoples' Rights : What knowledge, skills and languages for sustainable livelihoods ?- Tromsø, Norvège, 2-4 Avril 2014 par **Jennifer Hays** et **Irène Bellier** (SOGIP) et **Torjer A. Olsen** (Forum for development cooperation with indigenous peoples)

Cette conférence internationale organisée conjointement par SOGIP et le *Forum for Development Cooperation with Indigenous Peoples* (Tromsø, Norvège) visait à présenter les enjeux que représentent les questions d'éducation pour les autochtones.



We wish to express our gratitude to all of those who traveled great distances and took time out of busy schedules and away from their families and homes in order to join us this week in Tromsø to discuss the complex issues of [\*Education, Learning and Indigenous Rights\*](#), with particular attention to what kinds of knowledge, skills and languages people need to create sustainable livelihoods. We chose the title of this conference with the goal of drawing out the links between “education” and the right of indigenous people to determine their own livelihood strategies and development pathways, and the fact that access to quality education is a “right” in and of itself. Reflections on these themes were offered throughout this conference. The discussions also captured the complexity of the issue of “education,” including what it is for and what kind people want, and what kind of approach to take. One thing that is very clear is that there are no simple solutions, no “quick-fixes” and no one model that can apply to all situations.

### **Summary by Jennifer Hays and Irène Bellier (SOGIP) and Torjer A. Olsen (Forum for development cooperation with indigenous peoples)**

Nonetheless, there are clear patterns in the experiences of indigenous peoples with education, and clear guidelines for ameliorating the situation. Keynote speaker Jannie Lasimbang, the leader of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) study on education identified issues that are globally cross-cutting for indigenous peoples, including overall low success rates in mainstream schools, ongoing discrimination (perpetuated in part by schools) and loss of language. As Lasimbang and other speakers pointed out, Indigenous

Peoples' rights to education are clearly outlined in international documents ; it is most clearly expressed in article 14 of the UNDRIP, which specifies three points :

- 1) Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
- 2) Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
- 3) States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Thus the right to equal access to “mainstream” systems, as well as the right to establish alternative community-based projects, are both put forward in this and other indigenous rights mechanisms. As became very clear at the conference, this is not an “either/or” question. These are not separate concerns – they are intertwined in complex ways and the specific configuration of individual or community needs will vary depending on numerous factors, including available economic opportunities, local cultural and linguistic dynamics, and individual and community preferences, among others. Access to western/dominant knowledge is necessary, as is the recognition and validation of traditional knowledge and language. Many participants spoke of the need to bridge formal and indigenous systems of education – although this can be difficult because of the rigid requirements of mainstream systems based on “schooling” (Silvia Macedo).

This conference approached education in a very broad sense, as the intergenerational transfer of knowledge – it is not only about schooling. In this definition, education is at the foundation of many other things, including the reproduction of language, culture and values, and preparation for life in a particular community and in a larger globalized world. Education is linked to other rights of indigenous peoples ; including rights to language and culture, to livelihood, to self-determination (Jens Dahl). In particular the link between the rights to education and land was noted in various ways by different speakers. For example, in order to communicate traditional knowledge, indigenous peoples need access to the physical spaces – to their traditional lands (Sheila Aikman). In addition, indigenous peoples need access to information, understanding, languages, and international discourses, in order to contest their dispossession of land and to advocate for their rights (Lorelou Desjardins of the Rainforest Foundation of Norway, RFN ; Live Bjørge, SAIH).

### **Education beyond Schooling**

One theme that surfaced repeatedly throughout the conference, as noted above, was the problem with a narrow definition of education as schooling. In general, school focuses on a very specific set of skills, and these are not always – or even usually – those that match the aspirations, opportunities, or realities of indigenous communities. Furthermore, the history of most indigenous communities with school has been destructive. Indigenous participants in the conference emphasized this problematic relationship, describing schooling as a tool for assimilation (Kuela Kiema) and a form of colonization (Pedro Moye Noza), noting that school has deprived people of their traditional knowledge (June Oscar), emphasizing writing at the

expense of oral transition of knowledge (Machi Jorge Quilaqueo) and devaluing the traditions, knowledge and values of indigenous peoples (Karl Kristian Olsen). Svein Lund described the norwegianization period of education, which had the express goal of assimilating Sami and others into Norwegian culture and language ; this also paralleled a major under-representation of Sami peoples and culture in the mainstream curriculum (Kajsa Kemi Gjerpe).

In very many cases, education-as-schooling becomes a process of “deskilling” indigenous communities, as their own knowledge(s), languages, values, strengths, stories, capacities – are ignored, downplayed or even denigrated within formal education settings – many examples of how this happens were given throughout the conference. As a few presenters also recognized, some indigenous individuals have been able to succeed within these systems, and have gone on to become important community leaders and advocates for indigenous rights (Tatiana Bulgakova). This is not to be undervalued, and support for students to succeed in the mainstream system is absolutely necessary (Sidsel Saugestad). But those who succeed are a still a small minority of indigenous students. For the vast majority, the trade-off of participating in the mainstream system is not a very good “deal.” There are enormous barriers to getting a degree or other qualifications, and also to getting employment. Indigenous youth are often faced with a lack of options in the mainstream economy, or in their own communities. What kind of education is needed to meet the needs of indigenous communities ?

## **Models**

Several different models for approaches to indigenous education were presented at the conference. One general approach is support for indigenous students who attend mainstream schools, including : financial support, special support for indigenous students in mainstream classrooms, and through better representation of indigenous communities’ language, culture, values and realities in the classroom (Ellen-Rose Kambel, Kuela Kiema). In some cases (as described by Serena Heckler from UNESCO) books that describe indigenous knowledge systems in both the indigenous and dominant languages have been created for use in local schools. Such approaches also can be used to educate non-indigenous students, and sensitize them to local and global indigenous concerns.

Alternative models were also elaborated ; and many presenters emphasized the importance of developing educational approaches that reflect the traditional teaching and learning styles of indigenous communities. There are enormous bodies of research on education that increasingly confirm the effectiveness of the knowledge transmission strategies that tend to be used by indigenous peoples. Although this conference was not focused specifically on describing effective pedagogical approaches, some points were touched upon. For example, Jannie Lasimbang described three characteristics that surfaced during the EMRIP study on education : participatory learning ; a holistic approach and a nurturing environment that encourages mutual trust. Research has shown that all of these are connected with effective learning strategies. Other presenters mentioned respect for the autonomy of children and recognition of their innate love for learning (Eva Marion Johannessen) ; the role of the teacher as facilitators for students to create their own knowledge (Alta Blandford) and several noted the critical importance of community participation at all stages of project design and implementation.

The importance of education in the mother tongue is also widely accepted as a pedagogical ideal, though this option is not available to all indigenous students. Various facets of language and how it relates to education were discussed at the conference, including the role of education in language revitalization, and possibilities for developing alternative models of indigenous language learning (Trond Trosterud); the difficulty of implementing mother tongue education in highly multilingual societies (Isabelle Leglise, Valelia Muni Toke, Jacques Vernaudon; Marie Salaün); and the fundamental importance of recognition of and respect for students home language within education settings – even when the language of instruction might be a dominant language.

Specific community-based education models that were described included mobile schools, village schools, jungle schools, and schools in the rainforest (Tatiana Bulgakova, Bruce Parcher, Lorelou Desjardins, Silvia Macedo, Eva Marion Johannessen), and models based upon the oral tradition of storytelling, and “inquiry-based learning” (Machi Jorge Quilaqueo, June Oscar, Kim Anderson). Other, broader approaches included the development of regionalized indigenous curriculums at various levels (Vuokko Hirvonen, Luis Enrique Lopez, Pedro Moye Noza); and the creation of indigenous universities (Asta Mitkijá Balto, Alta Blandford Hooker) and programmes in mainstream universities dedicated specifically to indigenous studies (Björg Evjen, University of Tromsø). These approaches varied greatly, but they all had in common an approach that acknowledges a diversity of approaches to education, as well as cultural and linguistic diversity, and a deep respect for local knowledge and values. For all of these approaches, the cultivation of qualified indigenous teachers was also central to success – and also proved to be a challenge across the board.

### **Inspiration and Challenges**

One aspect of the conference that was mentioned by some presenters – and commented on frequently in breaks – was a rare sense of shared understanding about the realities of indigenous communities and the deep problems they confront in formal education – as well as a shared respect for the knowledge(s), languages, skills and traditional education systems of these communities. Experiencing this sense of “community,” as one participant put it, was deeply inspiring and has reminded us that we are part of a larger movement.

At the local level, however, there is often a sense of swimming against a powerful, sometimes overwhelming, current. There are many challenges, both to improving the mainstream system, and to implementing alternatives that meet the needs and aspirations of indigenous communities. Even in areas where bi-cultural, pluri-cultural, and multilingual, education are accepted in government policy and practice, there is a critical gap between the rhetoric of good intention, and the practical realities of implementation (Luis Enrique Lopez; Jacques Vernaudon); there is also a lack of awareness about what “rights-based” development or education means in practice (Serena Heckler, UNESCO). Education in most parts of the world is moving towards an increasingly standardized model, evaluated by measurable “outcomes” that are based on dominant languages, forms of knowledge, and social structures, and that do not capture the complexity of the linguistic and social landscape – nor of available economic options.

The model that privileges “schooling” as the only form of “education” as described above, constructs alternatives as “inferior,” making it difficult to recognize and include indigenous knowledge and languages, to provide alternative training and qualifications for indigenous teachers (Ellen-Rose Kambel, Bruce Parcher), and to access financial and political support for

alternative education endeavors. There is a fear that allowing for alternative education will result in increased marginalization for indigenous peoples. In some cases, indigenous peoples themselves resist alternatives that might be seen as inferior, and they insist upon full access to dominant languages and education systems, especially in areas where people have experienced institutionalized “inferior education” under racist colonial policies, such as south Africa, or the south Pacific (Marie Salaün). These perceptions of inferiority can make it very difficult to argue for alternative projects, despite the clear pedagogical advantages and support from international human rights tools.

### **Development cooperation :**

How can indigenous communities access education that meets their diverse needs ? What kind of development assistance is needed from the outside ? One important point that was emphasized throughout this conference is the need for projects to be initiated, defined, and constructed by indigenous people. It is not only a matter of consultation – indigenous peoples’ right to control their own education processes must be recognized.

In some cases, indigenous peoples may already be in a position to do this. However, in many cases, partnership is needed. Who should be the partners ? As several presenters made clear, ideally the state should provide the various kinds of education we have been talking about, as outlined in the UNDRIP. But governments are not always in a position to do this ; furthermore the tendency of government towards standardization and school-based models also creates the problems noted above. Other partners are needed to support alternative educational system for indigenous peoples. The challenge is finding funding for such projects. Resources are limited and Indigenous Peoples are not currently a “development priority” for Norway or other countries. Education is a priority area, however, and it was suggested at the conference that targeting education for indigenous peoples may be a way to channel more support in this direction (SAIH).

Examples of development cooperation presented at the conference were diverse and included support for mobile schools and village schools (Vidar Wie Østlie, NAMAS) ; schools in the rainforests of Indonesia (RFN) and Brazil (Eva Marion Johannessen) and support for indigenous education projects in Central and South America (SAIH). Cooperation between universities can also be a way to provide support for indigenous students to gain entry into higher education institutions and gain qualifications that they see as relevant (Sidsel Saugestad).

The presentations on development cooperation emphasized the need for *continuous* and *flexible* long-term support in collaboration with communities –driven by their aspirations. In particular, emphasis was placed upon the training of indigenous teachers, and the importance of finding bridges between indigenous culture and formal education in a contemporary world.

### **Culture, Community – Relationships**

*“Traditional education can be described as a life-long pedagogical process and an intergenerational transfer of knowledge aimed at maintaining a flourishing and harmonious society or community” - Jannie Lasimbang*

Although it is not reflected in the title, we have been reminded throughout the conference that

the need for a focus on education is not only about enforcing “rights” in legal systems ; and that it is not only about livelihoods and getting a job. It is also about culture, spirituality, community, ways of doing and being in the world, stories, songs, beliefs, values, and – as came up more than once – about love. It is about relationships – between children and parents and elders ; within a community, and with the wider world ; between people and the environment – and about the ways that we live, as individuals and communities, on this planet that we share. These aspects of education are rarely included in funding proposals or political documents – but as we heard at this conference they are fundamental to human existence and are a crucial part of intergenerational communication, and of the continuity of human societies.

### **Conclusion :**

Although the focus of indigenous education efforts is most often upon how to overcome the challenges that indigenous peoples face in entering into education systems that are defined by dominant groups, some presenters pointed out that those from the dominant groups also have a lot to learn from indigenous peoples. First and foremost, people in mainstream society need better understanding of the reality of modern indigenous societies that live “next door” and which are so often depicted in stereotypical ways.

Furthermore, rights to Indigenous education are not only about “allowing” indigenous people to have their “own” education systems. It would be enough if they were – this is clearly a right enshrined in international mechanisms. But the issues involved in education affect all of us. Working to support indigenous education efforts should not be seen as charity – but as an investment in the future of humanity in general as we search for more sustainable ways to live on the planet, for ways to improve education for everyone, for ways to live in community with each other. There is also a need to recognize the diverse and varied approaches to education employed by indigenous peoples as viable models that the mainstream can also learn from.