CHAPTER 1

THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE INDIGENOUS SPACE

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Indigenous peoples from all parts of the world have learned to use the United Nations and the international legal system to promote their rights and interests. Observers agree that they have been able to achieve results far exceeding those of other groups. This ability and these results are strong indicators of the configuration of indigenous peoples as a category of people in their own right. To reach this stage has been a long process, and some people have been involved since the very beginning, when the United Nations first began considering indigenous issues around 30 years ago.

The argument in this chapter is that indigenous peoples have achieved these results because they have been able to create an alternative space, one that is nurtured within the confines of the UN system, though existing in relative independence. Indigenous peoples who come to the United Nations have decided to oppose their governments from a “neutral” place where those governments are, at least for the time being, unable to control them. In the United Nations, indigenous peoples have “freed” themselves from their governments, but are also able to operate without constant constraints from their communities, traditions, and the realities of their daily social and cultural life. They are in a position to “freely” negotiate and reconsider cultural, political and ideological attachments. Those who are unable to do so are unable to benefit from the UN process and are therefore easily marginalized.
Indigenous peoples convene within the physical and political framework of the United Nations but the Indigenous Space itself grew out of resistance, and alternative traditions developed in the form of an indigenous caucus and a number of networks kept alive and, increasingly, brought into play in between UN meetings. The result is an indigenous space that has gradually developed its own existence but with its roots still in the indigenous communities, societies, and nations. The process of creating this space was also a process by which indigenous groups from all corners of the world, in constant negotiations, created a shared global indigenousness. People the world over noticed the UN achievements of those claiming indigenousness, and people were increasingly attracted by the platform and process. The results are important but no less so are the processes through which indigenous peoples have been able to create consensus among themselves. This has been possible because of similar historical trajectories and shared visions of the future, and in spite of immense differences in culture, economy and political conditions.

The creation of the Indigenous Space is a story of how indigenous peoples turned a situation of oppression and discrimination into one of human rights and how, by sharing experiences with other peoples with different cultures and traditions, they developed a shared knowledge and traditions. Indigenous peoples knocked on the UN door, wanting to get in; once inside they fought for recognition of their fundamental rights as peoples but they also struggled to be considered not as stakeholders but as rights holders and equal participants, albeit different from the peoples that were represented by the states. In these efforts, they established a platform and a space within the United Nations from which they managed to move from being “on the menu to being at the table” as once expressed by an indigenous person from Asia. In this process, the global indigenous identity developed as a social category, disputed but also accepted by most governments and observers, although challenged by some.

For 20 years, since 1989, as director of the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), I followed this process, taking part in endless UN meetings as a nonindigenous participant, observer, and researcher and thus got to know many of the key players in the process, including their backgrounds and visions, also sharing their frustrations and hopes. Since 2007, I have continued to take part in many of these UN meetings, now as a researcher.

In order to understand the process that takes place within the United Nations, we must begin by looking at what brought indigenous peoples together in the first place.