



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



UNITED NATIONS  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

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<b>Panelist</b>	Rodion Sulyandziga
<b>Panel</b>	Panel 5: Role of NGOs
<b>Time</b>	10.45 – 12.15
<b>Date</b>	Friday 24 February 2023
<b>Location</b>	Robert H. Lee Alumni Centre University of British Columbia 6163 University Blvd Vancouver, BC

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It is already well known that NGOs play an important role not only in the collection of facts concerning violations of human rights but also making contributions to the development of human rights norms. Much of the progress our planet has made is thanks to the work of non-governmental groups acting for the sake of human rights and fundamental freedoms. **Where the governments often build walls, NGOs and civil society activists have the capacity to greatly influence the well-being and shape the future of a new global agenda and new inclusive social contract.** I strongly believe that non-governmental participation in international standard-setting activities is a **PREREQUISITE** of democracy.

Many institutions and organizations, such as the United Nations, rely heavily on information concerning violations of human rights and indigenous rights provided by NGOs and groups. Two International Decades of the World's Indigenous Peoples saw the adoption of international standards and guidelines in addition to the establishment of institutions that specifically target the concerns of indigenous people including **the UN crowning achievement - adoption of UNDRIP.** The protection of indigenous peoples' rights and interests is becoming an important national goal, and the essential sphere of international cooperation. Today we can say that indigenous peoples have their hard-won visibility in international agenda. They are already part of the discussions, and there has been an allocation of funds dedicated to indigenous cause. What should be done now is a close attention. In virtue of a lack of experience, legal, economic, institutional background, indigenous people and their rights can be easily manipulated by those acting not in a good faith.

And sadly, despite progress in indigenous rights' recognition, indigenous leaders all over the world continue to critically analyze policies towards peoples who are often left neglected; indeed, unequal relations of power and ongoing colonization of native lands remains at the top of the agenda for many indigenous peoples worldwide. And while on the one hand, all over the planet indigenous peoples and their communities become increasingly involved in decision-making processes at national, regional and international levels, many of them have been targeted by state and enforcement agencies as undesirable elements, etc. who pose a threat to economic aspirations of a particular government or disagree with the official position of the state. As such, indigenous activism has become an increasingly dangerous endeavor.

Indigenous peoples story represents different things to different people. For some governments it is a story closely related to showing and claiming power. For economists, it is story of peoples holding economic potential and resources.



For environmentalists, it is the story of guardians of the most fragile environments and originators of sustainable development. For some people/organizations/companies - it's about the enemy, "last obstacle" standing on the way to profit.

In indigenous peoples' hearts the UN (and NGOs) hold a special place. It is a story of cooperation and finding an ally and a partner in the fight for human rights.

If you ask indigenous peoples themselves, their story is about all these things and much more. It is a story of both great victories and success and a story of failure. BUT: not a failure of indigenous rights, struggles and determination, but the perpetual failure of policy reforms, respect and recognition.

### **Domestic case**

As an example, sadly, I should refer to the cases of my own country where indigenous peoples are risking to become "ghosts of history", written off not only the history timeline, but the map of the Russian Federation. Geographically, we are positioned as far from both state and regional centers as possible. Politically, we are at the margins of power. Demographically, we are fast disappearing.

Observers tend to say that indigenous peoples' treatment has become the embodiment and even indicators of region's/country's development. If this is true, in Russian realities, indigenous peoples are indeed a reflection of current Russia - fractured, fragmented and weak.

The story of Russian indigenous peoples, sadly, is a story of conscious and deliberate strategy of erasing indigenous communities from the Russian landscape - socially, culturally, legally and physically; strategy that not only puts indigenous population at the brink of extinction, but silences the remaining. State jointly with business actors do not hesitate to use a variety of instruments to disempower indigenous communities legally, economically and politically. Indigenous peoples are left without powerful counterbalance. It is evident that the Russian Federation is not in a search for a more inclusive indigenous policy, and what is more, it is neither an aspiration nor a political goal of the federal government.

Under the circumstances where any human rights work is likened to "foreign agent" labeling and Soviet-era spying, the once vibrant Russian indigenous activism has been reduced to a knot of activist groups. In a country that profits from indigenous identity crisis, self-determination as such is seen as a rebellious act. Indigenous peoples and their rights in the country are neither recognized nor accepted; at best - tolerated.

Then, there is always a concern about the extent that governing structures within indigenous groups truly reflect the interests and concerns of the communities being governed. The implication is that the state must engage not only with formal indigenous representative bodies but also with grassroots community members in order to avoid cultivation of pro-government indigenous politicians and ensure representation of indigenous interests.

### **In conclusion**

To conclude my speech, I'd like to emphasize once again that the role and development of NGOs and a strong corpus of international human rights institution like UN pushing for a much more inclusive and respectful approach to indigenous



rights is essential and fundamental. These organizations tell the story about hidden peoples, testimony existing challenges; they manifest, represent and celebrate indigenous nations who experienced diverse, yet parallel, histories of social injustices and oppression.

They serve as a platform where lost indigenous voices are recovered; where untold stories, problems, challenges and hopes that are not present at national agenda, can be heard; they challenge us to find these hidden voices (and counterbalance the state "official line") and ways to confront injustices and violations of human rights.

There are a lot of standards already written, rewritten, drafted and printed. We can fill the room with all recommendations and other documents dedicated to the issue. What we need follow-up mechanisms, so we can put these standards everywhere.

**A right delayed is a right denied.**

And I believe I am talking on behalf of indigenous peoples: respecting indigenous rights strengthens democratic values, makes economic sense and an absolute must for environmental and sustainable progress.