

FINDING COMMON GROUND

Indigenous people across the hemisphere, with the support of Canada, are working together on issues from rights and self-determination to sustainable development and the control of lands and resources.

When Darrel McLeod, a Nehiyaw (Cree) from the Treaty 8 territory in Alberta, meets another Aboriginal person from anywhere in the Americas, it takes only a few minutes of conversation to find common ground.

They might compare notes on how they are keeping their languages and cultures alive, discuss social and health concerns that are widespread in Indigenous communities, or ask how the courts in their respective countries are dealing with land claims issues.

McLeod, the executive director of the International Relations Directorate at the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), says these shared concerns form the backdrop for the growing ties between Indigenous people in Canada and the rest of the Americas—links that Canada is playing a lead role in forging.

According to the Inter-American Development Bank, there are about 55 million Indigenous people throughout the Americas, some seven percent of the population. Social indicators for this group show higher rates of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and disease and lower levels of access to employment, financial resources, education and health services than among non-Indigenous people.

McLeod says Indigenous people in the Americas have been collaborating informally for perhaps 50 years, but their issues are increasingly part of the political dialogue at a higher level.

The First Indigenous Summit of the Americas, held in Ottawa in 2001 as a lead-up to the Third Summit of the Americas, was supported by the Canadian government and Aboriginal organizations. At the second such Indigenous summit held in Buenos Aires last fall, a few days before the Fourth Summit of the Americas, the AFN was one of the lead organizers.

A declaration adopted there rejects international agreements such as NAFTA and Mercosur, demands Indigenous peoples' participation in international forums and calls for the acknowledgment of the intrinsic value of the relationship of Indigenous people to their lands, resources, spiritual values and ancestral belief systems.

The declaration, presented to and adopted in part by the Summit of the

Americas a few days later, appeals for participation by Indigenous people in the political process. "Without our inclusion on an equal footing," it states, "democracy within the states will remain incomplete and unsatisfactory."

Keith Smith, a senior policy adviser on Aboriginal affairs at Foreign Affairs Canada, says the federal government supports Aboriginal initiatives in several ways—including through the Indigenous Peoples Partnership Program, financed by the Canadian International Development Agency. That program provides opportunities for Indigenous organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean to form partnerships with Canadian Aboriginal groups in order to contribute to the sustainable development of Indigenous people in their region.

Smith says that Canada "has a lot to offer in terms of best practices and lessons learned" on Aboriginal policy and is looking to learn from other countries as well.

Canada supports efforts by the Organization of American States to prepare an American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that will advance the quality of life and human security of Indigenous people in the region.

Symbolic of Canada's commitment to Aboriginal issues in the Americas—and the ties between Indigenous people across the region—is an inukshuk created by Inuit master carver Bill Nasogaluak that forms the centrepiece of the new Canada Plaza in Guatemala City, the capital of Guatemala. In that country, Indigenous people form a majority of the population. 🍁



An inukshuk grows in Guatemala: The centrepiece of the new Canada Plaza in Guatemala City is an inukshuk created by Inuit master carver Bill Nasogaluak out of Guatemalan stone, with a piece of Canadian granite from the Northwest Territories at its heart.