

Wilton Littlechild, on the 16-member panel. The Forum's mandate is to provide expert advice to the UN related to economic and social development, culture, human rights, the environment, education and the health of Indigenous people.

Canada has especially played an active role in UN efforts to arrive at a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. With the support of Foreign Affairs Canada (FAC), Aboriginal organizations from Canada have been involved in the preparation of a draft document.

Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, an organization representing First Nation communities across Canada, says the UN Decade has helped heighten awareness of the challenges faced by the world's Indigenous people, although he wishes it had accomplished more.

"We are disappointed that the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has not yet been finalized," Fontaine says. "On the other hand, 10 years ago the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues did not even exist. So, even though much work remains to be done, we have made important progress."

Global collaboration

Canada's international efforts with regard to Indigenous people are far-reaching. For example, Canada has sent delegations to countries including Chile, Argentina and Brazil to share its experiences in areas such as policing and justice in Aboriginal communities. Jeffrey Marder, Deputy Director of the Aboriginal and Circumpolar Affairs Division for FAC, says traditional Native methods employed in Canada, like using healing circles as alternatives to incarceration, "are not only effective, they are inexpensive, and they might have application elsewhere."

Other international initiatives include an economic development exchange established by the Ministry of Maori Development in New Zealand and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada to promote collaboration between the Maori and the Nisga'a Tribal Council in British Columbia.

Canada is currently working with the Peruvian government through the Pan American Health Organization to develop a solvent-abuse treatment program for Indigenous people modelled on one in Canada.

Canada and Mexico have worked together to develop opportunities for cooperative business relationships for Indigenous people, with numerous contacts and study tours between the two countries on development, education and other issues.



photo: CP (Colin Corneau)

A model in the North

A number of Canadian efforts on Aboriginal issues have been recognized internationally. For example, the establishment five years ago of the Nunavut Territory, which has a population that is 85 percent Inuit and covers one fifth of Canada's land mass, is considered a major step in Aboriginal governance. The negotiations leading to its creation were recognized in the 2004 UN Human Development Report as a lesson in power-sharing.

"Historically, Inuit were in full control of all aspects of their life. But missionaries, then the RCMP, government officials, and the creation of permanent settlements brought about a loss of the traditional, nomadic way of life," says Stephen Hendrie, Communications Director for the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, which represents the 45,000 Inuit in Canada. "The creation of the Nunavut government was a remarkably peaceful process in changing the map of Canada, using democratic instruments to achieve a result pleasing to Inuit and to other Canadians as well."

Given the importance of the North to Canada's identity and to the world as a whole, the Canadian government has set out a vision for this country in the circumpolar world, called the Northern Dimension of Canada's Foreign Policy. Its overarching goals are to enhance the security and prosperity of Canadians and to establish the region surrounding the Arctic Circle as a vibrant geopolitical entity.

Canada is working with other circumpolar countries to address common issues such as human security, economic

Celebrating Aboriginal contributions: Marissa Tacan, a member of the Sioux Valley First Nation, dances on National Aboriginal Day this year in Brandon, Manitoba.

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