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Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary	3
II. Background	5
III. Exhaustive Summary of the Panel Discussion	8
1. Opening Statement by the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights	8
2. Statements Delivered by the Panelists	9
Head of the Europe and North America Unit at the UNESCO World Heritage Centre	9
Co-Chair of the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on World Heritage	10
Director for World Heritage at Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History	12
3. Statements Delivered on behalf of Group of States	13
The European Union	13
The Kingdom of Denmark on behalf of the Nordic Baltic States, together with Greenland	14
4. Relevant Oral Statements by Other Delegations	14
The Republic of Botswana	14
The Republic of Guatemala	15
The United Mexican States	16
The Federative Republic of Brazil	16
The Republic of Indonesia	17
Malaysia	18
The Republic of Peru	18
The Russian Federation	19
The United Republic of Tanzania	20
The Republic of India	20
The Republic of Cameroon	21
5. Statements by United Nations Bodies	22
University for Peace	22
6. Statements delivered by Indigenous Peoples' Representatives	23
Anishinaabe Business Professional Association	23
Crimean Tatar Youth Center	24
Royal State of Tahiti and the Islands	24
Lawyers Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples	25
Maya Wajop Cambio	26
African Alliance for Indigenous Peoples	26
Winnemem Wintu Tribe	27
Indigenous Movement for Peace Advancement and Conflict	28
7. Statements by Civil Society Organisations	29
8. Concluding Remarks by the Panellists	30
Head of the Europe and North America Unit at the UNESCO World Heritage Centre	

30	
Co-Chair of the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on World Heritage	31
Director for World Heritage at Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History	32
IV. Position of the Geneva International Centre for Justice	33
V. References	34

I. Executive Summary

The Human Rights Council held on 23 September 2026 its Annual Panel Discussion on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples during its 63rd session, under the theme “*Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage: Indigenous Peoples’ rights and engagement.*”. The discussion examined the implementation of the 1972 UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) World Heritage Convention, and its implications for the rights of Indigenous Peoples, with particular attention to participation, Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), the protection of lands, territories and resources, including access to religious and cultural sites, the recognition of Indigenous cultural values, and the management and conservation of World Heritage sites.

As highlighted by the event’s panellists and several delegations, over 25 % of territories enlisted on the World Heritage List, as well as sites included on State Parties’ Tentative Lists, are located within the lands of Indigenous Peoples. In this perspective, participants broadly recognised that World Heritage protection can contribute to the preservation of Indigenous cultural and natural heritage, ancestral territories and livelihoods when Indigenous Peoples are recognised as rights holders and are fully and effectively involved in decision-making processes. Indigenous Peoples representatives and Civil Society Organisations raised serious concerns regarding the negative impacts that World Heritage processes may have when Indigenous rights are not adequately respected, including inscriptions taken without FPIC, exclusion from management, restrictions on access to ancestral and sacred sites, loss of control over lands and resources, forced displacement, criminalisation and violence, and unequal distribution of benefits arising from conservation and tourism.

Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) supports a human rights-based implementation of the World Heritage Convention that fully respects the rights of Indigenous Peoples, including their rights to self-determination, lands, territories, cultural heritage and meaningful participation in all stages of decisions affecting them. We stress that FPIC is an indispensable safeguard for World Heritage processes affecting Indigenous Peoples, and that World Heritage protection should never result in displacement, restrictions on traditional practices or loss of control over ancestral territories. GICJ further calls upon Member States and international organisations to strengthen accountability and accessible mechanisms for addressing these grave violations, particularly in relation to properties inscribed without

adequate consultation or consent, and serious human rights abuses currently occurring in these World Heritage sites.

II. Background

The theme of the 2026 Annual Panel Discussion on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples focused on the implications of the implementation of the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention. Initially, despite its limitations, it must be highlighted that this Convention is a landmark international treaty recognising not only the concepts of nature conservation and the preservation of cultural properties, but also the ways in which people interact with nature, and the importance of preserving this balance [2]. Since its conception, the Convention's mandate was to preserve cultural and natural heritage from increasing threats of destruction by changing social and economic conditions, invoking the concept of outstanding interest and need for preserving the world heritage of mankind as a whole [3]. Nevertheless, despite 25 % of these World Heritage sites being in Indigenous Peoples territories, lands, and resources, they are not included in the Convention's text.

Over the past 50 years since its adoption, and particularly after the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, UNESCO has reformed its operational guidelines to promote the inclusion and full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples in World Heritage processes. In particular, it has strengthened a human rights-based approach with respect for Indigenous collective rights, culture, knowledge systems and traditions with the objective of assisting the protection of ancestral territories and cultural heritage, including through the support of livelihoods and self-determined development [1].

Importantly, the concept of Indigenous Peoples' right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage is enshrined in Art. 31 of the UNDRIP, including both natural and social elements, such as knowledge systems of medicines, properties, oral traditions, literatures, and traditional cultural expressions. Moreover, the UNDRIP also describes Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination in deciding their own priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands, territories and other resources [4].

Despite these international frameworks and the existence of positive examples of sites nominated for the World Heritage list by Indigenous Peoples and managed consensually with inclusive participation, these cases are still the minority. Previously, in 2022, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples presented his report (A/77/238) on the

obligations of States and international organisations on protected areas and Indigenous rights, reporting alarming violations against these communities, including forced evictions, killings, physical violence, abusive prosecution and limited access to natural resources and sacred sites. Furthermore, in this report, the Special Rapporteur described the persistence of forced evictions for conservation purposes in the United Republic of Tanzania against the Maasai Peoples, which continues to present day, as argued by Indigenous representatives in this Annual Panel Discussion [5].

Likewise, over a decade ago, the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (A/HRC/30/53) reported that the establishment of World Heritage sites can often disrespect or fail to protect Indigenous Peoples' ancestral rights over their lands, since the areas inscribed on the World Heritage List can impose restrictions on their traditional practices and activities, in violation of their cultural and subsistence rights of indigenous peoples. In this opportunity, the Expert Mechanism noted that to be included on the World Heritage List, sites must demonstrate "Outstanding Universal Value", a concept that prioritises the protection of those heritage aspects in detriment of the land rights of Indigenous Peoples, undermining their relationship to their territories, resources, and livelihoods [6].

Progressively, the World Heritage Committee has advanced equitable and inclusive governance arrangements, collaborative management, access to redress, and the application of the principle of FPIC. Still, significant challenges remain in ensuring that these guidelines are consistently applied in practice at all levels [1], as well as the creation of a formal treaty mechanism for reporting violations to the Convention and seeking reparations, but also for monitoring the World Heritage processes in Indigenous lands.

In this sense, the HRC adopted, without a vote, resolution A/HRC/63/14 regarding the human rights of Indigenous Peoples. In this opportunity, several Member States reaffirmed the importance of promoting and protecting Indigenous Peoples human rights and enhancing their participation in the work of the United Nations concerning their rights and interests. Considering this, the resolution organised the participation of Indigenous representatives in the Annual Panel Discussion, as well as in Interactive Dialogues with the Special Rapporteur and Expert Mechanism [7]. Therefore, the Annual Panel Discussion represents a multilateral platform for Member States, UN bodies and agencies, such as UNESCO, Civil Society Organisations and Indigenous Peoples representatives to engage in meaningful dialogue on

these relevant issues and shed light into these urgent human rights violations against Indigenous communities.

III. Exhaustive Summary of the Panel Discussion

1. Opening Statement by the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights



The Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Awa Dabo, introduced the Annual Panel on Indigenous Peoples by highlighting the importance of the 1972 World Heritage Convention in recognising the links between preserving the environment and protecting the heritage of cultural sites. She noted that climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss pose threats to indigenous cultures and their traditions and beliefs, and that many world cultural and natural heritage sites are ancestral indigenous lands.

Notably, she highlighted the work conducted by the World Heritage Committee and States Parties in strengthening the rights and participation of Indigenous Peoples, welcoming the recent revisions promoted by UNESCO in the recognition of the need for State Parties to uphold Indigenous Peoples' right to FPIC in all decisions that may affect their lands, their territories, and their resources. In this sense, she argued that Indigenous Peoples should also share in the benefits of conservation and tourism activities developed around World Heritage sites.

Importantly, Ms. Dabo argued that World Heritage protection should never involve the forced removal of people, their loss of control over land and territories, and resources, restricted access to sacred sites or livelihoods, or the criminalization of spiritual and religious

traditions, customs, and ceremonies. In particular, she highlighted the efforts of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in strengthening the capacity of Indigenous representatives and human rights defenders, as well as the work promoted by the Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples in engaging these populations in meetings of the World Heritage Committee.

2. Statements Delivered by the Panelists

Head of the Europe and North America Unit at the UNESCO World Heritage Centre



As the Head of the Europe and North America Unit at the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Ms. Berta de Sancristóbal opened her statement by reaffirming the agency's commitment in advancing human rights through its mandate in education, culture, science, and communication. Initially, she highlighted the evolution in the recognition of the relationship between cultural and natural heritage, human rights, and sustainable development, including the International Decade of Culture for Sustainable Development.

Considering this, Ms. Sancristóbal noted that at least one quarter of UNESCO designated sites overlap with Indigenous Peoples lands, and reaffirmed the 1972 World Heritage Convention's mandate in identifying, protecting, and transmitting to future generations cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value. In this sense, she described the advancements on the implementation of this Convention through the engagement of Indigenous People in UNESCO, World Heritage Committee, International Indigenous People Forum on World Heritage, and United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms.

Additionally, she recalled that this treaty is an intergovernmental instrument, shaped through decisions adopted by third parties within its governing bodies, while also emphasising the

need for greater recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights, values, care, experience and knowledge. Ms. Sancristóbal further described the evolution of this Convention by moving beyond a predominant site center and expert approach to the acknowledgement of communities and Indigenous Peoples as custodians, knowledge holders, and partners in understanding heritage and its conservation.

Furthermore, she explained that many difficulties arise not only from insufficient participation, but also from the fact that Indigenous conceptions of heritage are not always fully reflected in existing approaches, and that the World Heritage Convention cannot solve by itself historic grievances, land rights, or address all the complexities of relations between Indigenous Peoples and States. Still, she reaffirmed the Convention's pathways for accountability measures, including the World Heritage Committee, despite the absence of a formal mechanism.

Finally, Ms. Sancristóbal spoke on the preventive measures, including the preliminary assessment process, to provide Indigenous Peoples' engagement at the early stages of implementation. She concluded her statement by stating that conservation is strongest when grounded in partnership, dialogue, and mutual respect, which involves conserving these sites, but also including the culture, nature, and living relationships of the people that live and sustain these territories.

Co-Chair of the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on World Heritage



On behalf of the International Indigenous Forum on World Heritage, Ms. Carmen Rosa Guerra Ariza opened her statement by highlighting the official recognition of this

independent platform by the World Heritage Committee, as a key organisation for reflection on the participation of Indigenous Peoples, and the identification, conservation and management of World Heritage sites. However, she stressed that the majority of the World Heritage sites located in Indigenous territories were enlisted without FPIC, and often without any consultation.

According to Ms. Guerra Ariza, the management of World Heritage sites can play a positive role for these populations, when it is done with their full and effective participation and respect for their cultural and collective rights, creating economic opportunities for Indigenous Peoples, in contrast with developments such as mining activities or infrastructure projects. She further recognised the World Heritage Committee's efforts in adopting practical guidelines urging State Parties to implement human rights-based approaches and explicitly acknowledging the challenges endured by Indigenous Peoples.

Moreover, she described serious violations against the human rights of Indigenous Peoples in the management of many World Heritage sites, with wide ranging evidence of abuses such as murder, sexual violence, torture, physical aggression, illegal detention and arrest, raids on homes, and the destruction and theft of personal possessions. In this perspective, she emphasised the lack of respect for their right to self determination and development, and their participation in the registration and management of sites, including the right to equitably share the benefits arising from tourism, with the harassment and criminalisation of Indigenous Peoples traditionally utilising their resources, highlighting many factual examples of these abuses.

In her concluding remarks, she explained the importance of Indigenous Peoples' participation, but also the recognition of their cultural interpretations, since the distinction between natural and cultural heritage and tangible and intangible heritage is based on an eurocentric concept, incompatible with Indigenous perspectives. Furthermore, she noted that the application of FPIC is inconsistent and non-systematic, since it is not currently a mandatory requirement for the designation of sites by State Parties, and that the rules of procedure of the World Heritage Committee do not allow Indigenous Peoples' representatives to effectively participate in its decision-making processes. Finally, she emphasised the importance of the establishment of dedicated human rights and independent complaints and reports mechanisms.

Director for World Heritage at Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History



Mr. Francisco Vidargas introduced his statement by noting that he spoke as the Director of World Heritage of the National Institute of Anthropology and History of Mexico, but also on behalf of the Wirarica community. Initially, he described the inclusion of the Wixarika route through sacred sites to Wirikuta as a new site on the UNESCO World Heritage list, a process that took over 30 years to be approved by the Wixarita communities.

In this sense, he explained this procedure by describing the fundamental importance of this territory to these populations, directly affecting their spiritual, economic, social, cultural and environmental issues. Secondly, he noted that the authorities from UNESCO and the Advisory Evaluation Body recommended its listing, with the subsequent adoption by the World Heritage Committee, recognising and supporting the protection of the Wiradikur world, including both the land and its natural elements, but also the sacred places of pilgrimage and their live memory.

Mr. Vidargas further stated that the conservation of the main sites of Tatiwahabi Hawaje, as chosen by the Wiratari communities and authorities, met their concerns on urban sprawl, inappropriate tourism, the disrespectful consumption of peyote, limited access to private properties and, particularly, mining in Virikuta. Additionally, he highlighted that this route now enjoys federal protection, including the protection of cultural heritage of Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Peoples and communities; and the recognition, protection and preservation of sacred shrines and pilgrimage routes.

Finally, he emphasised the current effort to reform Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution to recognise Peoples and communities as subjects of public law, to protect their knowledge and

tangible and intangible cultural collective heritage. To conclude, Mr. Vidargas described how the recognition from the international community to this sacred route signified an act of justice for this Indigenous community, and that the respect for its knowledge through correct management concerns every individual as a tribute to humanity.

3. Statements Delivered on behalf of Group of States

The European Union



The European Union (EU) reiterated its commitment to promote, fulfill, and protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples according to the UNDRIP, highlighting that many world heritage properties are located in the lands and territories of these communities. Moreover, the delegation stated that World Heritage status can assist in the protection of ancestral territories and cultural heritage, support livelihoods and advance self-determined development when Indigenous Peoples are effectively involved. Therefore, the EU expressed concern over the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples from the governance of World Heritage sites, arguing for their full, effective, equal, and meaningful participation in decisions affecting them. The delegation recommended that States consult and cooperate with these populations in good faith to obtain their FPIC, finally questioning the panellists on good practices for ensuring this in World Heritage processes.

The Kingdom of Denmark on behalf of the Nordic Baltic States, together with Greenland



The Kingdom of Denmark on behalf of the Nordic Baltic States, together with Greenland, argued for the full respect of the rights of Indigenous Peoples in decisions concerning their lands, territories, and cultural heritage, in accordance with the UNDRIP. The delegation noted that conservation measures must not restrict traditional Indigenous practices or deny access to cultural and sacred sites, respecting Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values, by obtaining FPIC. Finally, Denmark questioned the panellists on how States can best ensure the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in decision-making processes on World Heritage sites.

4. Relevant Oral Statements by Other Delegations

The Republic of Botswana



The Republic of Botswana acknowledged that Indigenous Peoples have long been stewards of many World Heritage sites, and that their knowledge, practices, and relationships with the

land have been crucial for the maintenance, protection, transmission and safeguard of their culture and natural values. Additionally, Botswana recognised Indigenous Peoples in their national context and reiterated its commitment in ensuring the respect and protection of their rights, cultural heritage and traditional knowledge systems. The delegation also affirmed that efforts are underway in enhancing Indigenous Peoples' participation in heritage identification and management, as well as improving consultation processes. Finally, Botswana stated that it would study the recommendations from the Panel Discussion to ensure full effective and meaningful inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in the heritage governance at all levels.

The Republic of Guatemala



The Republic of Guatemala introduced their statement by recognising the historic significance of this Panel Discussion in acknowledging the participation of Indigenous Peoples' representatives in their own capacity and not within Civil Society Organisations. In this perspective, Guatemala highlighted the example of the city of Takalik Abaj, later converted into the National Archaeological Park, where Indigenous Peoples' directly contributed to the conservation and management of this World Heritage site. Therefore, the delegation also emphasised the recognition of Guatemala's efforts by the World Heritage Committee in strengthening the involvement of Indigenous Peoples in the conservation of this site. In its final remarks, Guatemala questioned the panellists on the institutional and governance changes they would consider as priorities in guaranteeing the effective participation of Indigenous Peoples.

The United Mexican States



The United Mexican States began its statement by thanking the panellists and the presence of Mr. Francisco Vidargas, emphasising the importance of the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the Human Rights Council in their own capacity. Furthermore, Mexico highlighted the constitutional and legal reforms adopted in recent years, including the recognition of Indigenous Peoples as subjects of public law with legal personality and their individual and cultural heritage in 2024. Moreover, the delegation also described the adoption of a federal law protecting the cultural heritage of Indigenous Peoples and Afro-Mexican communities, as well as a 2023 decree recognising and protecting the sacred sites and pilgrimage routes of the Wixarika, Nayarit, Odam, and Mexican Peoples.

The Federative Republic of Brazil



The Federative Republic of Brazil stated that Indigenous Peoples' heritage is inseparable from their territory, knowledge, spirituality, and ways of life, and that these practices and

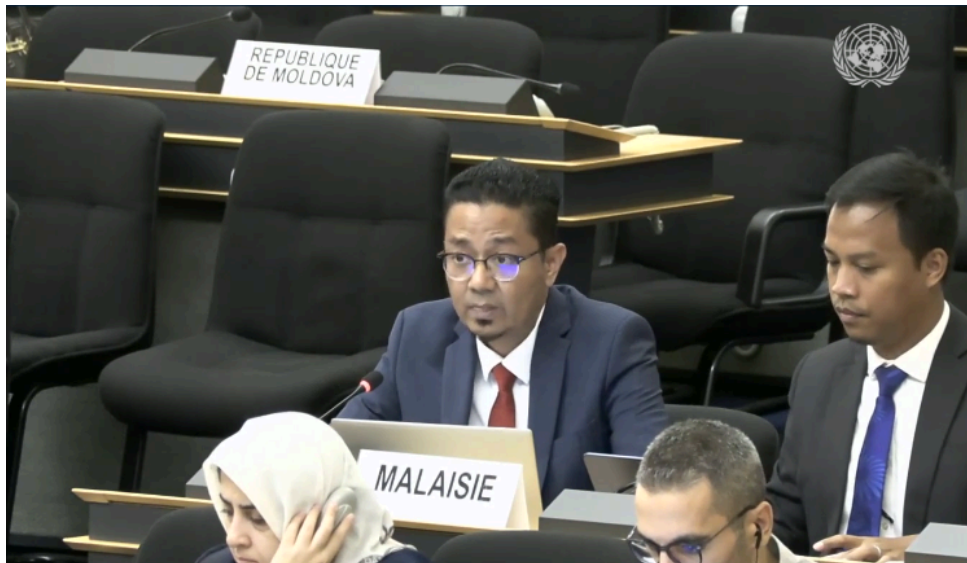
relationships with the environment should guide the implementation of the World Heritage Convention. In this sense, Brazil noted that Indigenous Peoples must meaningfully participate in World Heritage processes, affirming that, in its national territory, FPIC is incorporated into nomination processes, with the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the management of the sites, in instances where their heritage and traditional lands intersect. Additionally, the delegation emphasised how the restitution of cultural objects can reconnect heritage with peoples, illustrated by the return of cultural objects displaced by colonial legacies, including 607 Indigenous items from France to Brazil, and the return of the sacred Tupinambá mantle from Denmark in 2024.

The Republic of Indonesia



The Republic of Indonesia recognised that the role of preserving World Heritage also falls in the Indigenous communities as stewards of these heritage landscapes throughout generations. In this opportunity, Indonesia described the examples of the Subak World Heritage site in Bali, governed by traditional Tri Hita Karana philosophy, and the Komodo National Park, where the Ata Modo community maintains their customary relationship to the landscape, including their own locally-driven ecotourism as a model of conservation distinct from State-led tourism development.

Malaysia



In its statement, Malaysia reaffirmed its commitments to the 1972 World Heritage Convention in the protection of cultural and natural heritage for future generations. Therefore, the delegation described its national approach in cultural preservation alongside socioeconomic advancement, including the new Orang Asli development policy covering land, leadership, infrastructure and cultural conservation through the involvement of Orang Asli respondents. Additionally, Malaysia stated that it is reviewing their 1954 Aboriginal Peoples Act with proposed measures on the recognition of customary institutions and strengthened mechanisms for consultation on land related matters.

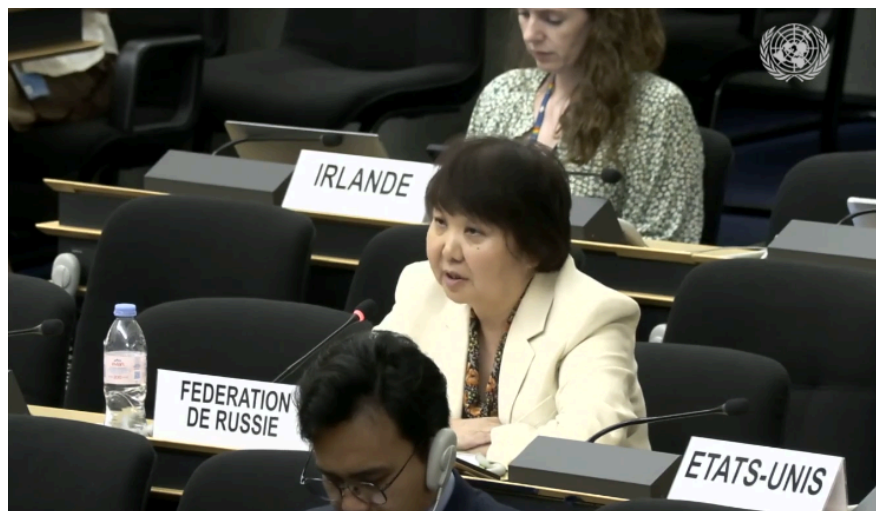
The Republic of Peru



The Republic of Peru recognised the importance of Indigenous Peoples participation in the whole World Heritage site cycle, from the identification and designation of sites to their

management, conservation, and monitoring. In this sense, the delegation highlighted that, within 13 Peruvian sites, there is an Andean network connecting various territories to the peoples preserving their practices and traditions. Moreover, Peru affirmed that their national Indigenous Peoples' and cultural policies promote the protection of collective rights, the safeguarding of cultural heritage and its intergenerational transmission. Finally, the delegation noted the challenges in ensuring sustained participation and equitable distribution of benefits in the management of these sites with Indigenous communities.

The Russian Federation



The Russian Federation noted its adoption of a law on tangible and intangible ethnic cultural heritage, stating that the UNESCO list contains many cultural sites of Indigenous Peoples, while only a single State register of historical and cultural monuments. Therefore, Russia gave special attention to its adopted national laws on shrines, explaining that certain landscapes are attributed as cultural heritage, and that the list of sacred places is established through the initiative of Indigenous Peoples. Additionally, the delegation affirmed that the conservation of these sites is facilitated by the activities of a small number of Indigenous Peoples territories, stating its objective in providing a special legal regime and a prohibition on industrial activities.

The United Republic of Tanzania



The United Republic of Tanzania began its statement by highlighting its constitutional guarantees on equal citizenship and the prohibition of discrimination based on tribe or origin, further noting that, despite conservation not being defined by the World Heritage Convention, it must serve people as well as heritage. In this perspective, Tanzania noted the alarming environmental and ecological degradation of the Maasai communities in Ngorongoro, stressing the need for practical, scientifically informed and sustainable solutions for addressing these issues. The delegation further emphasised the need for particular sensitivity when identity is linked to land, describing that, across Africa, overlapping patterns of settlement and land use require approaches that promote peaceful coexistence and social cohesion.

The Republic of India



The Republic of India reiterated its established position that the entire Indian population is Indigenous to the country, therefore not recognising Indigenous Peoples as a separate constitutional category. Nevertheless, the delegation noted the development of a comprehensive framework protecting the relationship of tribal communities with their lands, forests, and natural resources, including the 1996 PESA, which strengthened local self-governance and the role of Gram Sabhas; and the 2006 Forest Rights Act, which recognised individual and community forest rights. Additionally, India highlighted its 2013 land acquisition law, providing safeguards relating to acquisition displacement and rehabilitation.

The Republic of Cameroon



The Republic of Cameroon began its statement by affirming that the protection of cultural and natural heritage and the protection of the rights of Indigenous Peoples must be mutually reinforcing. In this sense, the delegation highlighted its national cultural heritage sites and recent commended efforts by the World Heritage Committee to promote the participation of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including at the Fauna Reserve of Dja and the Trinational of Sanga. Finally, Cameroon questioned the panellists on the best practices to reconcile the need to conserve World Heritage with the rights, ways of life, and traditional practices of Indigenous Peoples in developing countries.

5. Statements by United Nations Bodies

University for Peace



In its statement, University for Peace emphasised the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples from the World Heritage management processes, including on their traditional access and practices, and insufficient application of FPIC. This organisation reaffirmed its mandate to promote peaceful coexistence, which Indigenous Peoples have demonstrated with this heritage for generations. In this respect, University for Peace welcomed the recent revisions to the operational guidelines based on human rights, and echoed the call of the Expert Mechanism for the criteria defining outstanding universal value to fully and consistently reflect the heritage values attributed by Indigenous Peoples. Finally, it urged State Parties to ensure equitable and participatory governance in every stage, and FPIC as a binding condition for legitimate heritage protection.

6. Statements delivered by Indigenous Peoples' Representatives

Anishinaabe Business Professional Association



The Anishinaabe Business Professional Association representative spoke as rights holder of the Onigaming First Nation, which its ancestral territory comprehends one of the world's largest intact peatland carbon sinks and living cultural heritage landscapes. Considering this, the Representative argued that speculative mining companies continue to raise capital on stock exchanges to exploit their territories without FPIC. Furthermore, he noted the need for Indigenous heritage and economic development to strictly comply with the UNDRIP, calling upon UNESCO, Member States, and capital market regulators to mandate binding FPIC disclosure rules across financial and land use regulations.

Crimean Tatar Youth Center



The representative of the Crimean Tatar People argued for their full and meaningful participation in all issues affecting their heritage, considering that their culture is indissociable from their lands and identity. She further stressed that since the beginning of the occupation of Crimea by Russia, there has been the systematic damaging of the cultural heritage of the Crimean Tatar People, highlighting the destruction and irreversible alteration of the Khan's Palace in Bachchisarai. Likewise, she described illegal archaeological excavations in Heroness Taurica, an UNESCO World Heritage site, as well as at other sites in occupied Crimea, including the cave city of Bakla.

Royal State of Tahiti and the Islands



The Royal State of Tahiti and the Islands reaffirmed that for Indigenous Peoples, cultural and natural heritage is living, including their lands, languages, knowledge and the transmission of this culture through families. In this sense, he stressed that two Maori families have been

recently expelled from their ancestral lands, in violation of the rights enshrined in the UNDRIP. He further questioned the protection of heritage while the guardians of such culture are being forcibly removed from their lands, calling for the consideration of Indigenous Peoples in non-self-governing territories.

Lawyers Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples



The Lawyers Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples spoke on behalf of the L'Horneep, offering relevant examples of Indigenous participation in World Heritage governance in Thailand, Nepal, and Assam. Particularly, the representative argued that Indigenous Peoples' values, knowledge, institutions, and relationships with their territories should help the conservation governance itself, calling for implementation measures that reflect their diverse experiences, values and governance systems. He further urged UNESCO and State Parties to make FPIC and Indigenous values based governance central in the nomination, management, monitoring and review of World Heritage property.

Maya Wajop Cambio



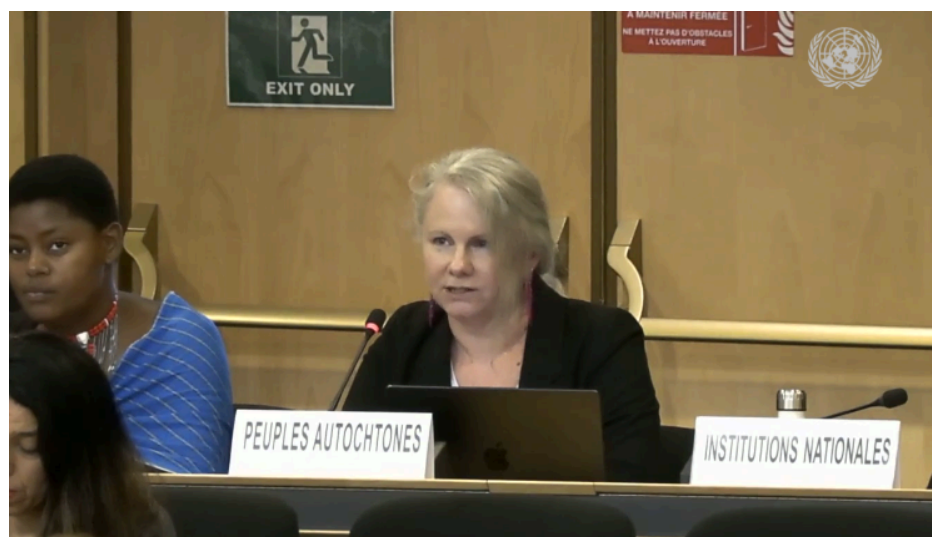
The Maya Wajop Organisation and Indigenous Peoples expressed profound concern at the nominations and inscriptions of UNESCO under the Convention on the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage, carried out without FPIC. The representative stressed that these declarations have contributed to pillaging, restriction of access to sacred and ceremonial shrines and violations of their rights to land, territory and resources. In this sense, she urged UNESCO to end the systematic omission of the UNDRIP and to guarantee the creation of a formal binding mechanism for participation of Indigenous authorities in all decision-making processes. Finally, she questioned the panellists regarding the specific measures and reparation mechanisms UNESCO will adopt to remedy violations of human rights committed against Indigenous Peoples in the context of World Heritage declarations.

African Alliance for Indigenous Peoples



The representative of the African Alliance for Indigenous Peoples described the alarming situation experienced by the Indigenous Peoples of Fulbe and Tuareg of Burkina Faso and Mali, including reports of massacres of civilians, summary executions, enforced disappearances and displacement, particularly in the context of fighting terrorism. Considering this, he further stressed the importance of the protection of the cultural richness of the Sahel, including their pastoral traditions, transhumance, and knowledge connected to their lands and natural resources. Finally, he stated that protecting global heritage must also include the protection of the lives and futures of the stewards of such cultures.

Winnemem Wintu Tribe



The Winnemem Wintu Tribe representative expressed that, while they still live on traditional land, their community faces near extinction, alongside the tribe's sacred salmon. In this respect, she stressed the challenges endured by the tribe, including colonialism, genocide, the ecocide of the salmon and constant threats of systemic cultural genocide. The representative emphasised the legal and political eradication of traditional spiritual Indigenous systems. Furthermore, she questioned the panellists on the measures UNESCO is able or willing to take legally and politically to protect Indigenous Peoples from cultural genocide and the loss of living sacred cultural ways and traditions, particularly in contexts where the State does not engage with UNESCO or is not party to the World Heritage Convention. Following this question, she also questioned the panellists on the ways traditional tribal authorities can directly engage to protect their heritage according to self-determination.

Indigenous Movement for Peace Advancement and Conflict



The Indigenous Movement for Peace Advancement and Conflict spoke on the Ngorongoro Conservation Area in Tanzania, stating that the Tanzanian government has been relocating Indigenous Maasai pastoralists from Ngorongoro, causing a severe human rights crisis. According to the representative, the national authorities have been denying essential public services to the Maasai people, violating their rights to adequate housing, health, education and self-determination. Furthermore, she stressed that this crisis is present across Africa, with the forced displacement of Indigenous Peoples at numerous World Heritage sites, ignoring the UNDRIP, and violating their right to FPIC. In this perspective, she recommended to the Human Rights Council to urge UNESCO and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for a formal collaborative mechanism for reporting human rights abuses and compel States to comply with international human rights standards, with the immediate cessation of all conservation-driven forced evictions.

7. Statements by Civil Society Organisations



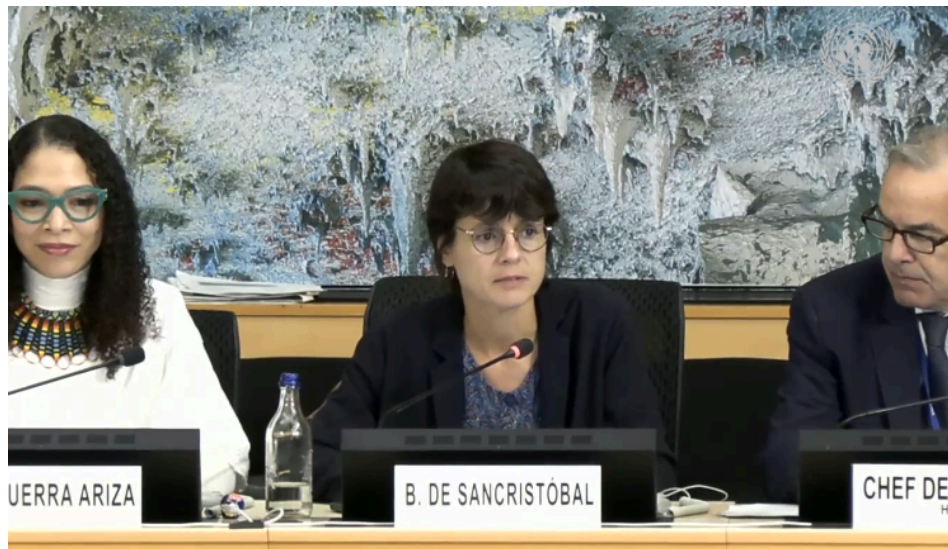
Several Civil Society Organisations expressed concern over the persistent marginalisation of Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities in the protection and management of World Heritage sites, highlighting violations such as dispossession, displacement, restrictions on access to ancestral lands, criminalisation of human rights defenders, and the destruction of sacred and cultural sites. They stressed that heritage protection must recognise Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and FPIC, ensuring their full, effective and meaningful participation in the management of heritage sites and their consequent benefits.

Additionally, many Civil Society Organisations further called for the recognition of Indigenous cultural values and relationships with land as an outstanding universal value, with particular concern over the impacts of mining, extractive industries, infrastructure and other development projects on Indigenous territories. Furthermore, these organisations highlighted cases of violence and repression against Indigenous communities and defenders in various countries, including Paraguay, Palestine, Russia and Australia, and called for independent investigations and protection from criminalisation, intimidation and reprisals.

In sum, they urged Member States and UNESCO to align World Heritage processes with the UNDRIP by strengthening Indigenous participation in decision-making, protect cultural and linguistic heritage, and ensure that Indigenous Peoples' rights are prioritised in conservation and sustainable development.

8. Concluding Remarks by the Panellists

Head of the Europe and North America Unit at the UNESCO World Heritage Centre



Ms. Berta de Sancristóbal welcomed the discussion at the Human Rights Council as a beginning of a more structured cooperation between human rights mechanisms and the World Heritage Convention. Firstly, in response to the remarks made during the discussion, she acknowledged that genuine collaboration with Indigenous peoples needs to take place at every stage of the World Heritage process, beginning with the tentative list and before a nomination is considered.

Furthermore, she emphasised that such collaboration requires time and that FPIC must include the possibility of an informed decision not to become a World Heritage site. In this sense, Ms. Sancristóbal also highlighted progress in creating processes ahead of nomination, including preliminary assessment, where concerns can be raised before examination by the World Heritage Committee.

Still, she recognised the importance of improving mechanisms for future nominations and addressing properties already inscribed before revisions to the operational guidelines, in some cases without due diligence, dialogue or FPIC. Moreover, she stated that UNESCO is working with the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on World Heritage and the advisory bodies to examine these sites, finally reaffirming that the World Heritage Convention needs to be grounded in human rights and protecting those who inhabit heritage places.

Co-Chair of the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on World Heritage



Ms. Carmen Rosa Guerra Ariza began her concluding remarks by thanking the Indigenous Peoples representatives for their courage in bearing testimony of important and very painful cases for the territories, peoples, and their lives themselves. In this perspective, she called for the recognition of these serious situations and their resolution, answering questions related to reparations by explaining that each case is reviewed on a case-by-case basis to understand, first of all, whether or not FPIC was implemented, and secondly, if there have been other violations of rights which occurred, to ensure the comprehensive protection of rights.

Furthermore, she emphasised that it is unacceptable for Indigenous Peoples to be given the opportunity to engage in debates after decisions have been made, arguing for the establishment of special mechanisms, including in monitoring missions. Finally, Ms. Guerra Ariza highlighted the importance of Indigenous Peoples institutions in national and international contexts, noting the need for those self-government institutions to be taken into account at all points in the process of declaring a World Heritage site.

Director for World Heritage at Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History



Mr. Francisco Vidargas noted in his concluding remarks that the World Heritage Convention addressed communities relatively late, but subsequently developed its approach through credibility, conservation, capacity-building, communication, and communities (the “Five Cs”), and closer attention to intangible cultural heritage. Considering this, he stressed that UNESCO cannot resolve all challenges alone, but can establish mechanisms for joint work with the United Nations, while primary responsibility remains with UNESCO and Member States. Furthermore, in response to the question on good practices, Mr. Vidargas highlighted Mexico’s experience with the Wirikuta route, where Indigenous communities directly participate in decision-making and management, while the State and local authorities play a supporting role, describing how comprehensive management, conservation, sustainability and safeguarding plans are as a means of ensuring good practice.

Additionally, he clarified that World Heritage should not be reduced to tourism marketing and emphasised the importance of sustainable tourism. In his final remarks, he emphasised the need for greater coordination among UNESCO cultural conventions for strengthening comprehensive protection of tangible and intangible heritage, particularly in contexts of conflict and threats to Indigenous cultures, and reaffirmed the World Heritage Convention’s role in promoting multilateral cooperation and peace.

IV. Position of the Geneva International Centre for Justice

Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) expresses serious concerns over the human rights violations reported by Indigenous Peoples representatives during this Annual Panel Discussion in connection with the nomination, inscription, conservation and management of World Heritage sites, but also on the reported cases of forced displacement, restrictions on access to ancestral and sacred lands, destruction and alteration of cultural heritage, criminalisation, violence, and the exclusion of Indigenous authorities from decisions concerning their territories. Alarming, these Indigenous representatives reported massacres, summary executions, enforced disappearances and displacement affecting Indigenous communities, as well as the continued expansion of extractive activities and mining projects in Indigenous territories without FPIC.

GICJ is particularly concerned by allegations that World Heritage designations and conservation measures have been undertaken in certain contexts without adequate consultation or FPIC, which subsequently contributed to restrictions on traditional practices, access to sacred sites and control over ancestral lands and resources, and the destruction or irreversible alteration of Indigenous cultural heritage. These violations profoundly disrespect Indigenous Peoples right to self-determination and the very survival of their cultural heritage, knowledge systems and traditions, which are intrinsically connected to their lands and territories.

GICJ further stresses that Indigenous Peoples must be meaningfully involved from the earliest stages of identifying and nominating World Heritage properties and throughout their management and conservation. In this sense, Indigenous institutions and traditional authorities must be recognised as legitimate participants in the decisions affecting their lands, heritage and future.

GICJ calls upon Member States and international organisations to implement effective formal accountability and remedy mechanisms for the reporting, monitoring and reparations of violations of Indigenous Peoples' rights in World Heritage processes. In particular, we urge UNESCO and States to ensure that the protection of World Heritage is grounded in the self-determination, dignity, respect and protection of the Indigenous Peoples who have safeguarded these territories and heritage for generations.

V. References

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