

# Philanthropists and Indigenous Leaders Talk Solutions to World's Pressing Problems

By [Terri Hansen](#) June 16, 2011



Courtesy International Funders for Indigenous Peoples

Shuar medicine person Anunk Nunkai of the Amazon, and Jeniffer Konante from Kenya in discussion at the International Funders for Indigenous Peoples conference recently held at Oneida Indian Nation's Turning Stone Casino, in Verona, N.Y.

**Philanthropy has often overlooked the world's 300 million Indigenous Peoples. But the need for climate change solutions makes clear that contributing to our common good must also encompass Indigenous Peoples for their role as protectors of the earth's biological resources, integral to climate mitigation.**

Indigenous Peoples occupy 80 percent of the last remaining biodiversity-rich wilderness. Their land has routinely been taken by conservation and environmental groups, casting them out into the fringes of society. They lose their foods, traditional medicines, and their livelihoods. The world loses too. Not only their ecological experience gleaned over thousands of years of contact with those coveted lands still pristine because of it. It loses their adaptation know how, recently acknowledged by the **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change** as "key," when they **recognized pre-Colombian peoples adaptation** to climate change two thousand years ago.



Christensen Fund executive director Ken Wilson leads a seminar at the International Funders for Indigenous Peoples conference recently held at Oneida Indian Nation's Turning Stone Casino, in Verona, N.Y.

“Recognition is dawning that Indigenous Peoples hold time-tested answers to some of the gravest problems facing the planet today,” said Evelyn Arce, executive director of the **International Funders for Indigenous Peoples**. At IFIP's conference last month in Verona, New York, indigenous leaders and influential donors discussed the world's most pressing questions as much as they did philanthropy. The more than 100 participants connected innovative solutions to such issues as sustainability, resource management, and the changing climate.

It's important to remember that “life is not monetarized everywhere,” said Dr. Wolde Tedesse, program officer for the **African Rift Valley for The Christensen Fund**. “We live in realities where cash and market are not central.” Indigenous Peoples engage in “reciprocal exchanges,” Tedesse said. Climate change is fostering even more reciprocity. In the Gamo Highlands of Ethiopia where Tedesse is from if one community suffers from say, an unseasonal drought, another community automatically offers cattle and seeds.

Climatic changes are forcing donors to better understand their role. Simply providing disaster relief can disrupt traditional reciprocal relationships among neighbors. In Africa for example, increasing erratic rainfall forced seasonally flooded communities to rely on outside resources, a situation that fractured local support systems.

“The Indigenous Peoples grew dependent on the government,” said Ken Wilson, **Christensen Fund** executive director. “As relationships broke down, conflicts increased.” That insight led to a funding shift. Instead they gave money to neighboring tribes to distribute to flood affected tribes, according to their traditions, with feasts, settling of old accounts, and through the gift of cattle, and seeds. Ultimately, it revived the reciprocity practiced for millenia. It was a lesson in “how formal philanthropy can achieve far more than simple relief,” said Wilson.

Formal indigenous philanthropy is a growing trend that reached \$75 million in grants in 2010. “The amount of funding to Indigenous Peoples has been declining, while Indigenous-controlled funding has increased,” said Carly Hare, executive director of **Native Americans in Philanthropy**. Native American philanthropy evolved through three major phases, Hare said. Dedicated groups like the **Seventh Generation Fund** emerged in the late 70s. The Alaska Native Claim Settlement Act

dominated the late '80s and '90s, largely with academic scholarships. Funding grew from gaming and economic development strategies of various tribes in the late '90s.

Official statistics often overlook funding that's done through traditional channels. Most U.S.-based Indigenous Peoples-run funding goes directly to tribal communities, education and the environment. Funding is also dedicated to helping other tribes achieve economic growth. Last year the Chippewa/Minnewa/Sioux people gave \$30 million for a revolving community development loan program for other tribes, Hare said. Others gave \$1.3 million for Haiti relief work.

Indigenous participants from other parts of the world were excited to hear of indigenous-run philanthropy. NAP has entered the international funding arena with projects in Mexico, and Hare spoke to several about the possibilities. "We invite your organization to come to the Amazonian jungle to visit our projects, so we can learn from each other," said Raul Nunink, a Shuar leader from southeast Ecuador.



Raul Nunink of the Shuar people of the Amazon with another Indigenous participant.

Indigenous participants were also impressed by the visible economic success of the **Oneida Nation's** venture into gaming, the **Turning Stone Resort**, where the May 25-27 conference was held. It gave them hope in the form of one example of indigenous economic sustainability. "This is really something, that they employ five thousand people here," marveled Jeniffer Konante, vice president of the **Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee**. "We have casinos in the cities in Kenya, but they are not run by Indigenous Peoples."

For Roberto Marin, a Barasano leader in the Colombian Amazon, the development of Indigenous economic development models and governance is key to both natural resource protection and cultural survival. "If I can't formulate policies in my own house, I can't expect the government to

allow me to govern myself,” Marin said. “Only if we have local governments working can we protect our natural resources.”

In an innovative strategy to protect their environment and way of life, the Barasano people sought funding for research equipment, and rigorously documented their environment, and minute details of their cultural practices. At one point more than 150 community members were taking notes. They documented all their sacred sites and stories, including their “Ecological origins of time.”

They presented their findings to the Colombian government after six years of solid research. They used their socio-environmental study in negotiations, “to make sure social programs are created by us and are directly under our control,” said Marin. And uniquely, they’ve asked the **United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization** (UNESCO), who governs world heritage sites to recognize their traditional knowledge as a ‘world heritage.’ UNESCO has recognized dance, Marin said, “but this is the first request for a holistic approach.”

IFIP’s annual conferences are unique in that they facilitate face-to-face dialogue between major donors and Indigenous Peoples. Both groups lend insight and experience to creating viable, effective donor-recipient partnerships, Arce said. The central New York’s Akwesasne-based organization held their tenth conference at the nearby Oneida Turning Stone resort, one of New York’s five top tourist destinations. It drew human rights activists and indigenous movements who discussed how to use U.N. human rights instruments for social change. Armstrong Wiggins, director of the Washington-based **Indian Law Resource Center** discussed his early involvement with the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and where he wants it to go next.

Other sessions looked at corporate abuse of indigenous rights, using indigenous resource management models to create sustainable communities, the importance of wedding traditional ecological knowledge with western science, fiscal sponsorship of indigenous organizations, and funding models for grassroots organizations. And there were the perennial favorites; traditional ceremonies, site visits, networking, and the IFIP awards dinner. IFIP’s prestigious award went to the Indonesian-based **Samdhana Institute**, “for exemplifying how a small grants program can work with grassroots activists for high impact among local Indigenous environmental and social justice movements.”

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