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Capitol Hill Human Rights Commission holds first in a series of Indigenous hearings

WASHINGTON, DC -- In the first of several planned hearings on global Indigenous issues, Indigenous leaders from Latin America came to Washington and warned of economic development practices that sabotage their communities and the environment at large.

In response Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., co-chairman of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in Congress, called for investment in the Indigenous protection of their own lands, both as a conservation measure and a recognition of Indigenous rights.

"Protect land, protect it from development that would displace people," McGovern said from the chair.

Rebecca Adamson, president and founder of First Peoples Worldwide in nearby Fredericksburg, Va., attended the session and said afterward that its primary importance is that it happened -- and that successive hearings will highlight similar Indigenous issues outside the Americas.

"Testimony from worldwide Indigenous communities will establish the many patterns of dispossession faced by first peoples," said Adamson, whose organization supports Indigenous land tenure and autonomous traditional knowledge through direct grants.

"Direct investment in Indigenous Peoples, through granular, locally guided grantmaking, is our best hope of both protecting the environment and sustaining the people, all people, over time."

Ellen Lutz, executive director of Cultural Survival, which worked with the commission to set up the hearings, said afterward, "The hearings provided Latin American Indigenous Peoples with their first opportunity to tell the U.S. Congress what happens when governments determine that the resources on Indigenous lands actually belong to the state. Invariably the state claims that the lands are not Indigenous, or that what is underneath them belongs to the public and thus can be exploited by state or corporate interests."

Lutz said the Ngobe of Panama are a case in point. "Panama asserts that the Ngobe are not Indigenous, but rather 'under-developed' poor people in need of education and opportunity. Its solution is to move individual families to Changuinola, the heart of Panama's banana industry, ignoring the Ngobe's communitarian culture, their non-monetary economy, and their right to give their free, prior, and informed consent when decisions about their future are being made."

Indigenous representatives from Peru, Panama, and Colombia all testified to other consistent patterns of dispossession that have plagued first peoples and placed their environments at risk for decades. Indigenous lands are "seen as useful tools for the accumulation of wealth" said Dario Mejia of the Zenu in Colombia, and Indigenous Peoples themselves as "an inconvenience," added Feliciano Santos of the Ngobe in Panama. "We do not accept ... playing with the hunger, the thirst and the pain" of the Ngobe, whose remote, uncomputerized

river communities, divided from one another by geography, have been further divided by strategic infusions of corporate money and favor in support of a hydroelectric dam.

Daysi Zapata Fasabi, representing the Yine in Peru, bore witness to another familiar proceeding: the national government, easing its way toward gold, oil and wood extraction from Indigenous lands in the Peruvian Amazon, has enacted "dispossession" laws that led to protests, shootings, and the predictable demonization of Indigenous Peoples who demand their rights. But in this case, said Fasabi, the tactic backfired and public opinion forced the government to "consult" with some 61 Indigenous groups, to no effect as of the April 29 hearing.

As consistently as Indigenous representatives testified to patterns of dispossession, McGovern cut through the familiar rhetoric of U.S. agency executives whose talks with governments often go on over the heads, and designedly outside the earshot, of Indigenous Peoples.

McGovern strongly encouraged direct conversation between Indigenous Peoples and national governments, especially with regard to the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) proposed between the United States and several Latin American nations. Every Indigenous witness opposed an FTA that doesn't feature procedural guarantees for full Indigenous participation, arguing that otherwise their resources will be defined away as free while they miss out on the benefits of trade.

McGovern acknowledged that the FTA negotiation process seems to exclude Indigenous Peoples. "I hope we move away from that. If we're all talking about the rights of Indigenous Peoples, they need to have a larger presence."

As a welcome step toward that larger Indigenous presence, he took note of the Obama administration's recent commitment to review U.S. resistance to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. McGovern also applauded the administration for an about-face from the hidebound Washington habit of "stovepiping" Indigenous issues in siloed departments, instead of exposing them to broader approaches and enhanced resources.

Even so, the first of multiple planned hearings provided textbook instances of several dispossession measures long deployed against Indigenous peoples, among them the sanitized language and false promises of relocation, divide and conquer tactics, the improvisation of laws levied against Indigenous rights, institutional neglect and study commissions.

Washington has its own ways of rendering people invisible. One of the oldest in the book, the disappearing panel trick, got a welcome variation April 29: federal agency higher-ups delivered their testimony first, answered a few questions, and left without listening to indigenous witnesses who had traveled thousands of miles to speak up for their people and their environments. Unusually though, not every agency official left, and one or two returned.