

The Global Support Initiative to Indigenous Peoples and Community-Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCA-GSI)

Title of Workshop: Revitalizing the Belize National Indigenous Council (BENIC) to address today's IP challenges

Level: National

Place: Belmopan, BELIZE

Date: 26 March 2018



BACKGROUND:

As contextual challenges and opportunities for Belize's indigenous peoples (IPs) continue to emerge and change, the UNDP-implemented GEF Small Grants Programme (SGP) organized a workshop to evaluate the functionality of the Belize National Indigenous Council (BENIC). Held at the George Price Centre in Belmopan, Belize on March 26-27 2018, the workshop was funded by the Global Support Initiative to Indigenous Peoples and Community-Conserved Territories and Areas ([ICCA-GSI](#)) with the aim of strengthening BENIC's work to be more focused, efficient and relevant to today's IP issues.

BENIC was established in 1998 as the focal institution to represent IP collective rights on national and international policy issues that affect the four indigenous linguistic communities of Belize. Namely, these groups are the Garifuna, the Mopan Maya, the Q'eqchi' Maya and the Yucatec Maya.¹ Whilst its recent revitalization on December 3, 2017, members agreed that there is an urgent need to reflect on BENIC's past achievements, identify the relevant best practices to best serve IPs in today's context and develop a strategic plan of how to go forward.

BENIC's mission is to engage in dialogues with its respective collaborators to articulate, advance and protect the rights and interests of the island nation's IPs. As such, IPs will have a national presence and engage with national partners in advancing national development policies and strategies. This two-day workshop was the first stepping stone toward achieving this long-term goal.

WORKSHOP PARTICIPATION AND OBJECTIVE:

Representatives from the four Garifuna, Mopan, Yucatec and Q'eqchi' indigenous groups participated in the 2-day workshop. Specifically, these included the (i.) National Garifuna Council, (ii.) Inno'on – La Oh student group at the University of Belize, (iii.) Maya Leaders Alliance, (iv.) Northern Maya Association of Belize, (v.)

¹ Currently, BENIC members are the Inno'on – La Oh student group at the University of Belize, the Maya Leaders Alliance, the National Garifuna Council, the Northern Maya Association of Belize, U'kuxtal Masewal and the Western Maya.

U'kuxtal Masewal, (vi.) Julian Cho Society and (vii.) Western Maya.

With the objective of revitalizing BENIC's functionality, participants focused on six fundamental issues:

- (i.) History- and background-sharing of BENIC, with special focus on new members.
- (ii.) Institutional assessment of BENIC and the identification of strengths, weaknesses, gaps and current opportunities to be used for the development of its work plan.
- (iii.) Modification of governance and membership structures to adapt with new and current context of IPs in Belize.
- (iv.) Identification of challenges being faced by IPs in Belize today.
- (v.) Identification of available opportunities for the effective participation of IPs at the national and international levels.
- (vi.) Agreements on immediate actions for the development of a draft work plan for the next 12-18 months.



Participants evaluate BENIC's functionality to align it with emerging IP issues in Belize

WORKSHOP DISCUSSION POINTS:

I. Background and functions of BENIC

Dr. Filiberto Penados gave a presentation on the background of BENIC and its role as a long-time member of the Central American Indigenous Council (CICA) and the Fondo para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas de América Latina y el Caribe (FILAC). However, it has been latent in recent years at the national and international levels and its participation needs to be reactivated. He also recommended on major components wherein BENIC could improve on. These components include:

- ❖ BENIC should expand its scope and represent more IP groups throughout Belize.
- ❖ BENIC needs to organize better at the grassroots level and improve its grassroots representation.
- ❖ BENIC should become the national platform to address issues affecting the nations' IPs and where IPs could come together to support each other's struggles as members of a unified council.
- ❖ BENIC must seek to have a stronger representation nationally and internationally.
- ❖ BENIC must seek to make proposals for the formation of a nation that is inclusive of all peoples and respectful of all human rights.

II. Evaluation of BENIC's membership and governance structure and key components to consider

In the past, the membership of BENIC was based on organizational representation. Indigenous organizations who had interest in becoming members would designate their representatives to BENIC. From these representatives, a board of directors comprised of 7 members would be chosen as the decision-makers for the organization.

Participants agreed that the new membership and governance structure should capture the current realities of IPs.

Current realities of Belize's IPs		
<p>The Yucatec Mayas in northern and western regions of Belize</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have been largely assimilated by mainstream society and putting their cultural integrity at risk. • Many of these communities are currently focusing on reviving some of the lost elements of their culture such as language, traditional games and cultural/social practices. 	<p>The Garifuna</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They continue to struggle with the reaffirmation of their culture and correlating rights. 	<p>The Mopan and Q'eqchi' groups in the south of Belize</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They stand united as they continue to endure their long struggle for recognition of their land and resource rights. • They continue to challenge the legal, political, economic and social systems of the Belizean state.

III. Current Challenges faced by Belize's IPs

The participants were divided into groups and were asked to identify (i.) the current issues that affect the well-being of IPs; and (ii.) their aspirations and (iii.) the role they see BENIC playing in resolving the challenges.

Identified Current Issues of Belize's Indigenous Peoples	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IPs continue to be marginalized in Belize. • IPs are feeling displaced, especially with regard to land security and resource rights. • IPs are losing their identity, culture and land in Belize. • IPs' cultural and natural heritage are being exploited. • The government is not hearing the cries of IPs with regard to communal land titles. • IPs are underrepresented in the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IPs do not have the finances to invest in opportunities available; and there are few opportunities (e.g. low-interest rate loans) for IPs to uplift themselves in Belize. • Poor marketing of local production. • IPs are facing erosion of their ways of organizing and governance. • IPs are facing a breakage in family values and principles. • IPs have low access to proper health care. • Crime, corruption, homelessness and

Supported by:



based on a decision of the German Bundestag

Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.

<p>Government of Belize.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Government is failing to live up to UN Conventions with regard to IPs rights.	<p>social ills affecting the rest of Belize are also affecting Indigenous Peoples.</p>
--	--

Identified Aspirations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Live a dignified life as Indigenous Peoples of Belize• May all rights of IPs in Belize be respected and protected• Need for reparation from colonial harm done by geographic, social and cultural “divide and conquer”• Retrieval of spiritual and cultural, ancestral homeland connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dignified existence as Indigenous Peoples• Assured fair share of nation’s wealth• End poverty and ignorance• Cultural revitalization• Overcome marginalization• Increased unity among Indigenous Peoples in Belize

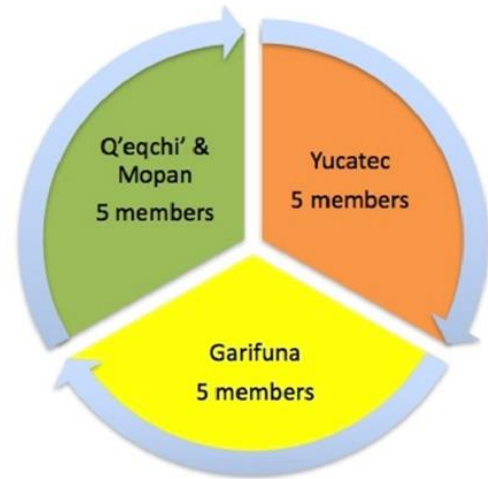
BENIC’s Role as identified by workshop participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Becoming the main advocacy organization for IP rights in Belize and becoming a “watch dog” for the compliance of IPs rights.• Create a space for dialogue and networking• Promote awareness• Contribute to policy changes in Belize.

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES:

I. New membership and governance structure for BENIC

BENIC'S new governance structure is based on the identified realities of IPs. It was agreed that the indigenous linguistic communities from each of the realities (or constituents) must identify five representatives from their communities to become members of BENIC's new governance body. The Yucatec and Garifuna will identify 5 representatives each. The Mopan and Q'eqchi' decided that they will jointly select their 5 representatives, since they are united in struggle, their representation and aim is to maintain that unity.

BENIC's new board of directors, comprised of a total of 15 members, will be made up of (i.) women, (ii.) youth, (iii.) elderly, (iv.) Spiritual leaders, and (v.) other. Moreover, two members from the Garifuna and Maya youth associations at the University of Belize will be invited as observers on the Board of BENIC. This decision is based on the recognition of declining cultural values and traditions amongst indigenous youth, as well as equipping them to become the future leaders of IPs struggles in Belize. This will guarantee continuity in the decision-making and organizational processes of BENIC.



BENIC's new governance structure

The 'BENIC Chair' post will be held by a lead delegate from each of the three indigenous constituents. The post will be rotated on an annual basis, with the first chair being the representative from the Q'eqchi' & Mopan group. The Garifuna lead delegate will be the Chair on the second year, and followed by the Yucatec for the third year. The Vice-Chair will be held by the other 2 lead delegates not acting as Chair that year.

The remaining executive positions such as the Treasurer (financial representative) and the Secretary will be held by the other 12 members based on expertise and experience, and will be rotated every three years.

Agreed deadlines include (i.) 13 April 2018: Each constituent group must submit the names of the 5 representatives from their group to Dr. Filiberto Penados; and (ii.) 28 April 2018: Meeting for the selection of the remaining executive members and development of a work plan.

II. Draft Vision and Mission for BENIC

Based on the discussed challenges and aspirations, the participants highlighted key principles that should guide the vision and mission of the organization. Thereafter, they agreed on the vision and mission statement.

Supported by:



Empowered lives. Resilient nations.

based on a decision of the German Bundestag

Key principles guiding BENIC's vision and mission	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Protection of IP Rights • Revitalization of Culture to be strong and vibrant, and actively shaping Belize 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capture concepts of unity in our own language: <i>au bun amuru nu</i> – I for you, you for me. • Komonil – togetherness

Vision: BENIC envisions indigenous peoples living well as communities, free of discrimination of any kind and actively participating in shaping an inclusive Belize and the world.

Mission: BENIC is a network of indigenous peoples, founded on the principles of *au bun amuru nu*, *komonil* and *muuch' kuxtal*. It is committed to advancing the well-being, the full enjoyment of rights and active participation in national and international spaces of indigenous peoples.

III. Immediate action points to be taken by BENIC

For effective contribution towards the development of BENIC's work plan, immediate action points were identified at the workshop.

BENIC's Action Points towards Work Plan Development	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify on-going and pressing national projects that Indigenous Peoples need to address urgently • Identify policy reforms that IPs need to review • Identification of policy decisions that affect Indigenous Peoples in Belize. • Establish an interim communication strategy among IPs (at BENIC). • Improve the regional representation at FILAC and CICA. • Identify regional projects that support Indigenous Peoples (e.g. PMIE), and facilitate active participation opportunities • Collaborate with Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the accreditation at FILAC. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively participate at the Network of Indigenous and Tribal communities in the Caribbean. • Review the various projects in biodiversity, conservation, REDD+ and other relevant thematic areas and evaluate the extent of IP participation as well as respect and recognition of IP rights and well-being. • Perform a scoping study on current IP issues in Belize and areas of opportunity to influence policy development. • Create an enabling space or platform for IPs to provide inputs as well as instrumental tools for the engagement of young indigenous scholars. • Develop the BENIC website. • Draft and disseminate workshop outcomes via a press release.

IV. ICCA-GSI Strategy in Belize: Presentation by SGP & the Belize Enterprise for Sustainable Technology



BEST presenting ICCAs draft strategy to BENIC members

The last session of the workshop focused on the development of the ICCA-GSI national strategy in Belize. Presentations were given by Mr. Leonel Requena, the GEF SGP National Coordinator in Belize, and Mr. Dennis Jones, the Managing Director of the Belize Enterprise for Sustainable Technology (BEST). BEST is an NGO recruited by SGP through a competitive process to develop a *catalytic ICCA initiative* including strategic plans of ICCAs and landscape governance in Belize.

To this end, the BENIC members, SGP and BEST agreed on the importance of full collaboration amongst themselves and to have further discussions on the strategy development. The BENIC members stressed

the significance of IPs full and effective participation in the strategy development, and requested for BEST to provide a working sessions with them, and possibly other IPs representatives, to fully comprehend the strategy, discuss its approach from an indigenous perspective and give their inputs into its drafting. The SGP agreed that BENIC’s proposal is necessary and confirmed to finance such working sessions.

To increase support to and recognition of Belize’s ICCAs, the ICCA-GSI will continue to partner with BENIC.

The [ICCA-GSI](#) is a multi-partnership initiative that is delivered by the UNDP-implemented Small Grants Programme ([SGP](#)) and funded by the Government of Germany, through its Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety ([BMU](#)). Key partners include the United Nations Environment Programme’s World Conservation Monitoring Centre ([UNEP WCMC](#)), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature’s Global Programme on Protected Areas ([IUCN GPAP](#)), the [ICCA Consortium](#) and the Secretariat of the Convention of Biological Diversity ([CBD](#)).

