

## **Indigenous Peoples Have Always. Led by Collaborative Action: Saving the Planet Depends on Working with Them**

**By Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim**

The M'Bororo Fulani of Chad – my people – have an unchanged rule that we have passed on from generation to generation. Each child must know the names of his ancestors over 7 generations. And each of us must act keeping in mind the upcoming 7 generations. This tradition has its roots in the centuries my community has been living in harmony with nature.

We are nomadic and semi-nomadic cattle herders, and each year, our herds move across the savannah of the Sahel, following the rhythms of the seasons. In the dry season, we approach Lake Chad to find water and pasture to feed our cows. When the rainy season comes, we head to the savannah, to feed our animals in the fresh pastures. Some of us can move far to South and cross frontier to tropical forests. Our whole life is based on nature. We observe the clouds, the winds and the insects to make weather forecasts. We know what plants to use for traditional medicine, what fruits, vegetables and cereals we can eat. We are also the guardians of the Sahel's fragile ecosystems and green forests. Our herds help fertilize the soil, and our seasonal migrations give nature time to regenerate. Thinking about the 7 generations that will follow us, we have adopted a simple rule: make sure that the plants that cure us and feed us, that the water we drink, that the wood we use to cook our food will still be present in 7 generations. I do not know many cultures who think in this way of the grandchildren of their grandchildren' grandchildren out from indigenous communities.

Our way of life has served us and our environment well for centuries, but it is now disappearing for reasons beyond our control. Climate change is already hitting us hard. The dry seasons are longer, and the rainy seasons shorter. During the hot season, temperatures frequently reach near 50°C. Communities of fishermen, farmers and pastoralist (ranchers) are fighting for the few resources that remain, be it water or fertile land. When I was born in the early 1980s, Lake Chad was the 5th largest lake in Africa. It covered around 10,000 km<sup>2</sup>. When my mother was born 60 years ago, it covered 25,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Today, it covers barely more than 2,500 km<sup>2</sup>. In less than 2 generations, 90% of its water has disappeared – water that is the most precious commodity to the people.

The land that has nourished us for so long is becoming so dry, so poor, that I fear for the survival of my people, my culture, my language, and my identity.

Unfortunately, the disaster my people are experiencing is far from unique. Indigenous peoples from the forest watch their centuries-old trees burn in minutes. Indigenous peoples in the Arctic are seeing glaciers melt in front of them. My brothers and sisters in the Pacific are powerless against rising sea levels. Nature – for generations our most precious friend – is becoming our most dangerous enemy.

But all is not lost – not yet. I will not give up the fight, and neither will my brothers and sisters from Brazil, Australia and the Pacific. I fight so that our way of life, our identity, our ecosystems will escape destruction. With our traditional knowledge, we have solutions to offer that would stop climate change and end the 6th mass extinction of biodiversity. Over the centuries, we have learned how to live in harmony with nature, which in return protected us. We know how to protect the

forest; we know how to protect the oceans. We know how to find water in the worst drought, and we know the plants that are edible when a hurricane destroys all crops.

I know there is a way out of this environmental crisis. Human beings are likely to be the most intelligent of all animals. Economic and political decision makers seem to only dream of artificial intelligence, of technology. But I would like to remind them that nature is the most beautiful technology, and that the wisdom of an indigenous grandmother has more intelligence than in the most powerful computer.

I am not sending this message to future generations, but to present one. According to scientists, we have 10 years left to act. 10 years is less than a generation. 10 years so that in a century or two, our great grandchildren will be still be able to marvel at the magnificent landscapes of the Sahel, its animals, its trees. 10 years to find a sustainable way of life that will allow each man, each woman on this planet to think of the 7 generations to come, and to decide to leave them a planet in harmony (re)found between humanity and nature.