

WHO IS INDIGENOUS?



The Sanskrit word **Adivasi** (literally, 'original inhabitant') is commonly used throughout South Asia to designate the region's indigenous peoples. In Sri Lanka, the adivasi or indigenous communities are identified as such by their self-declaration as matrilineal descendants of the legendary Queen Kuveni. Broadly speaking, indigenous people live in close-knit traditional societies and maintain a close relationship to their ancestral territories.

Internationally, the World Bank's definition of indigenous people is similar to that accepted by governments and development projects worldwide. In its Operational Directive 4.20 of 1991, the World Bank defines indigenous people in the following terms.

The terms "indigenous people", "indigenous ethnic minorities", "tribal groups" and "scheduled tribes" describe social groups with a social and cultural identity distinct from the dominant society that makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the development process.

Because of the varied and changing contexts in which indigenous peoples are found, no single definition can capture their diversity. Indigenous people are commonly among the poorest segments of a population. They engage in economic activities that range from shifting agriculture in or near forests to wage labour or even small-scale market-oriented activities. Indigenous peoples can be identified in particular geographical areas by the presence in varying degrees of the following characteristics:

- [a] a close attachment to ancestral territories and to the natural resources in these areas;
- [b] self-identification and identification by others as members of a distinct cultural group;
- [c] an indigenous language, often different from the national language;
- [d] presence of customary social and political institutions; and
- [e] primarily subsistence-oriented production.