

NATALI SEGOVIA, ESQ.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
WATER PROTECTOR
LEGAL COLLECTIVE



Between Recognition & Reclamation: Indigenous Peoples, the International System, and the Future of Solidarity

People's Academy of International Law
October 24, 2025

Water Protector Legal Collective

- ▶ Water Protector Legal Collective (WPLC) is an Indigenous-led 501(c)(3) nonprofit law firm and advocacy organization that protects Indigenous rights, the Earth, and climate justice movements.
- ▶ WPLC was formed in 2016 in response to the threats DAPL posed to the Water and the mass criminalization of Water Protectors.
- ▶ I was recently asked what major project WPLC is working on – my response was “fighting invisibility.”



Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Visibility

- ▶ 1923: Cayuga Chief Deskaheh of the Haudenosaunee traveled to Geneva to petition the League of Nations. He sought recognition of the Six Nations' sovereignty and treaty rights.
- ▶ He was turned away and denied the right to speak because Indigenous Nations were not recognized as sovereign Nations.



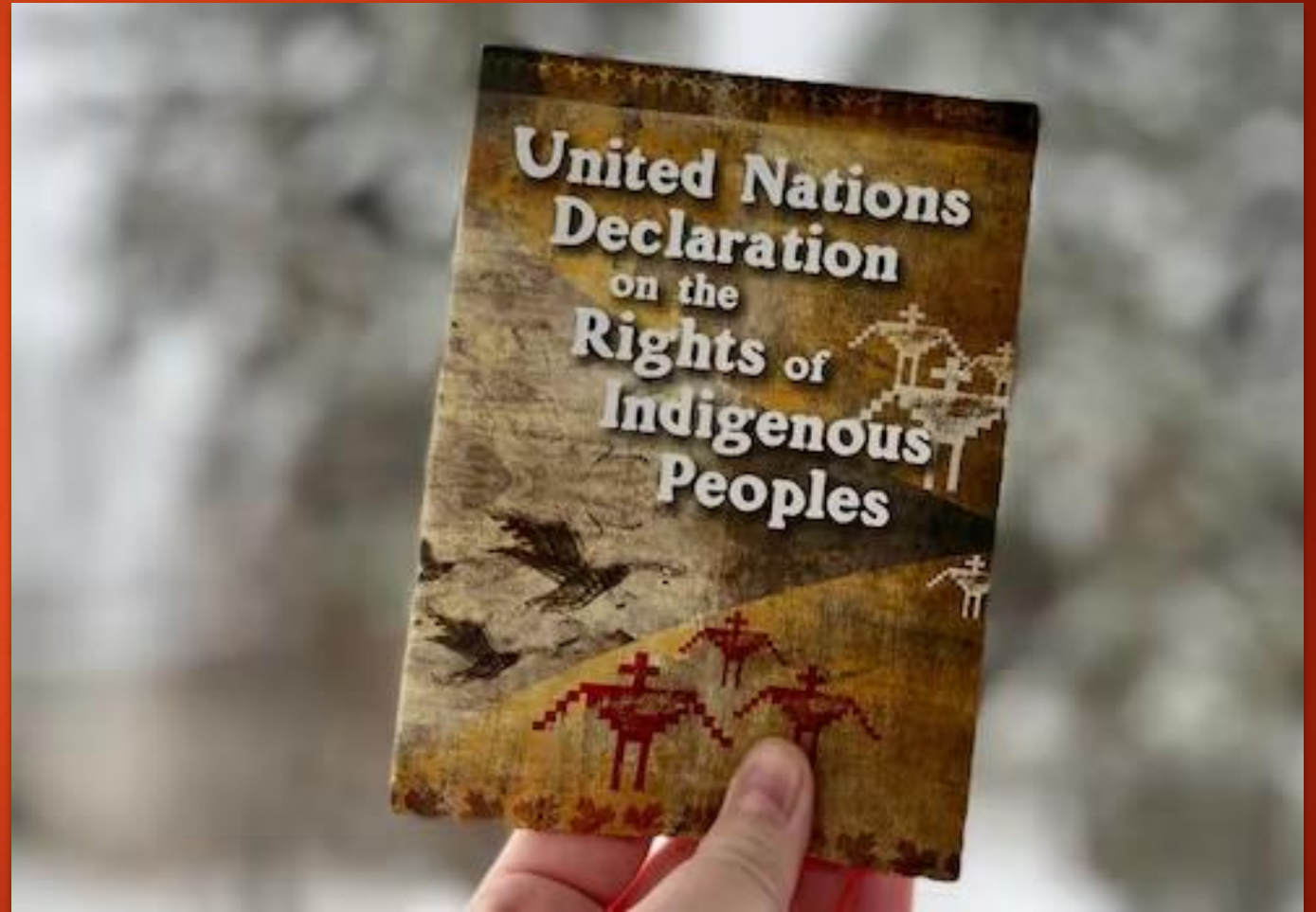
Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Visibility

- ▶ 1977: the first UN conference was held with Indigenous delegates: the International NGO Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas in Geneva.
- ▶ It was a watershed moment - it was the first time the UN engaged Indigenous leaders directly, on our own terms.



United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

- ▶ 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples after more than 20 years of advocacy and negotiation.
- ▶ 144 states voted in favor, 4 against—Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States—and 11 abstained.



UNDRIP Art. 46

- ▶ Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, people, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act contrary to the Charter of the United Nations or construed as authorizing or encouraging any action which would dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent States.



A Flawed Ontology

- ▶ *“Today, at the United Nations, only States and NGOs can speak. So if you're not a member state, then you have to declare yourself as a non-governmental organization, an NGO, in order to register and to speak... We are governments. We are not NGOs. Indigenous Peoples' governance is not recognized by the UN. We, the Haudenosaunee, refuse to register as an NGO. It [has been] 100 years now”*

- Kenneth Deer, Mohawk (Bear Clan)



Collapse: International System in Crisis

- ▶ The silence and inaction of the international community in response expose a deep hypocrisy: the very system meant to safeguard Indigenous rights allows violence against Indigenous bodies with impunity. We are still invisible.
- ▶ Global Witness reported that in 2024, at least 146 defenders were killed, one-third of them Indigenous, most of them protecting forests, rivers, and lands essential to planetary survival. These deaths are not isolated; they are symptoms of a system that privileges extraction over life.



Beyond the System: Internationalism *Desde Abajo*

- ▶ Indigenous Peoples have always practiced transnational solidarity: from Standing Rock to the Amazon, from Arctic waters to desert plateaus, through global networks of water protectors and land defenders.
- ▶ Accompaniment and solidarity at the grassroots level allow us to respond to what is most needed on the ground. It allows us to show up for one another when global institutions cannot or will not act.
- ▶ This is not the rejection of internationalism, but its regeneration and reclamation: community-based, community-centered, grounded in reciprocity and human understanding.



Beyond Recognition, Towards Reclamation

- ▶ Our obligations are not to the territorial integrity of states, but to the territorial integrity of the Earth and to the protection of life itself.
- ▶ The challenge and opportunity before us is to reclaim spaces and (re) imagine what lies beyond the colonial systems that still shape our world, and root that imagining in responsibility to land, to each other, to future generations.

