Fighting for the rights of indigenous peoples

La Paz, Bolivia: During my one-year assignment in Bolivia as a UN Youth Volunteer, I worked at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) within the Indigenous Peoples Unit. I became familiar with indigenous peoples’ rights in a country where 42% of the population identify themselves as indigenous.

My background as a human rights lawyer helped me to understand the serious challenges and threats that are living the Guarani peoples in the Chaco region.

The Guarani are Bolivia’s third indigenous group, and the largest group in the eastern lowlands. In the Departments of Santa Cruz and Tarija, the communities are damaged by fumes, noise and water pollution emanating from gas extraction activities. Their crops and livestock are harmed, as their health and their traditional ways of lives are affected.

In accordance with international law and Bolivian regulations, the national
authorities have to consult indigenous peoples regarding any plan or project that might affect them. Free, prior, and informed consultation (FPIC) broadly refers to the rights of indigenous peoples to participate in decisions affecting their lands and resources. I was responsible for monitoring these processes of consultation and participation regarding plans to extract natural gas from the Guarani’s lands.

By monitoring these processes, I was able to follow-up cases of violations of human rights. I organized courses on indigenous peoples’ rights addressed to indigenous representatives and public servants. In permanent contact with the Guarani peoples and their leaders, I believe that I have been able to deliver them information and to contribute in strengthening the local organizations.

I have been fortunate to receive this volunteer opportunity and be able to live one year with tribes that are lacking water or electricity but feel rich of what they have, living with their communities in harmony with the nature. Indigenous peoples have a holistic view of the world: every little thing has an impact on the whole system. As a UN Youth Volunteer, I have to say that it is indeed what I’ve experienced this year. In the same way as my work on the field has made a difference, this fulfilling experience changed my life.

I warmly recommend volunteering for anyone who is interested in creating positive change in society and for oneself.

Bio: Fanny Declercq was a UN Youth Volunteer fully funded by the Government of Belgium. She served as a Human Rights Associate Officer at the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Bolivia from February 2013 to February 2014. She previously studied international law in Belgium and The Netherlands.