Diplomado of Indigenous Women
Economic Autonomy and Environmental Justice

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MODULE V
Environmental Justice and Indigenous Women’s Empowerment
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To identify and analyze factors and barriers impeding environmental justice for Indigenous Peoples, as well as successful strategies applied by indigenous women in order to achieve the environmental justice that contributes to their individual and collective empowerment.
Unit. 1

The objectives of this unit are the following:

a) To analyze what indigenous women understand by environmental justice.

b) To know the indigenous women's contributions for the debate on environmental justice at the different levels.

Let's read and discuss:

The issue of environmental justice — especially associated with climate changes and impacts around the world— has become increasingly important in the recent decades. In international discussions, both academics and international organizations have been involved in the definition of this concept. Climate programs, projects and actions trying to achieve environmental justice at different levels have been encouraged in our countries and regions, usually in accordance with provisions pre-established from the outside of our realities.

The environmental justice issue must be discussed from the perspective of rights, which include environmental aspects. Originally, environmental justice was discussed from the perspective of living in a healthy and safe environment, an inherent right regardless of ethnic origin, where all the people should have equal opportunities to be protected from environmental threats at home, school, work and participate in environmental planning processes to achieve it (Cohen, Edelson and Fischbach S.A.). This first approach to environmental justice from the perspective of health, disrupts many spaces, people and indigenous peoples around the planet. The proliferation of companies engaged in the extraction of primary resources in developing countries, as well as the increase of environmental impacts related to climate change — even related to climatic migrants—, are having a great impact on local populations.

For indigenous peoples, and specifically for indigenous women, the struggle for land, territory and natural resources has been a central axis of their demands. The Beijing Conference in 1995 was one of the first instances in which Indigenous Women from different regions of the world had the space to meet at an international level and articulate their demands together. At the end of the conference, Indigenous Women elaborated their own declaration, affirming their identity and their struggle as Indigenous Women. Their main proposals include the "environmental justice" issue.

Below, let’s read some approaches submitted by indigenous women since 1995. How do they resemble the current situation in our communities?

The Earth is our mother. From her, we receive our lives and our capacity to live. It is our responsibility to take care of our mother and when taking care of our mother, we take care of ourselves. Women, all of them female, are the manifestation of Mother Earth in human form.

We demand that the international community and governments acknowledge and respect our rights to our territories. It includes our right to decide what to do with our lands and territories and to develop them in a
comprehensive and sustainable way in accordance with our own worldview.

We urge governments that offer our territories to foreign investors, particularly mining companies, respect these rights. They must also fully inform us about the development projects and investments to be executed in our territories. We have the right to be involved in making decisions regarding these matters. The lands of indigenous peoples that have been destroyed by mining corporations, or that have been used as dumps of toxic, radioactive and dangerous waste must be restored by companies or governments that have allowed such destruction.

We demand that our unalienable rights to our cultural heritage be acknowledged and respected. We will resist any process attempting to destroy this heritage or attempting to alienate us from our resources and knowledge.

Throughout the last decades, as part of the global strategy of environmental justice, indigenous women have influenced different spaces to advert to the impact adverse environmental effects have on them. In order to achieve environmental justice, indigenous women propose healing and empowerment strategies, as well as the strengthening of indigenous ancestral knowledge, to find the path for “our spirits to return to us and us and restore our collective dignity, our identity and our confidence in our own strength.” To this end, we will have to work collaboratively to make our voices louder, share our experiences and information, develop strategies and create solutions that we can jointly undertake. We also reaffirm our pressing need to expand and strengthen our partnerships in order to address our shared concerns more effectively.

The concept of Environmental Justice

Let’s learn about the origin of the concept of environmental justice

The term environmental justice was first used in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, as a result of social struggles within the context of debates on environmental injustices that Afro-American populations were going through. Authors such as Crawford (2009, cited in Bellmont, 2012) consider that racist practices turned African-American groups into victims of social and environmental injustices. Since the 1990s, actions had been taken in the search for solutions to such injustices, expressing for the first time the term “environmental justice”, representing a symbol of the claim of rights.

In 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit took place in Washington, D.C. At the end of the summit, on September 27, the delegates adopted seventeen principles framed in the importance of processes and structures breaking the environmental differences and injustices in which this ethnic community were living. According to Martínez Alier (2008), this movement was driven by local issues of diseases caused by pollution in poor and African-American neighborhoods in the United States.

Therefore, when we talk about environmental justice, we automatically refer to a concept related to human rights, and the importance of claiming them.

in unfavorable spaces before situations of environmental crisis. Even though this term was built and discussed by the most disadvantaged groups, many nongovernmental organizations—unconnected with local populations—have coined the concept and have included it into their daily work and negotiation processes regarding socio-environmental conflicts.

¿ What is Environmental Justice?

Let’s read and discuss:

¿ When the environmental justice term was first used and who were the first to use it?

The concept of environmental justice implies a series of elements that have been differently used according to each claimant’s objectives and needs. It should be noted that environmental justice primarily integrates human rights elements, identifying social and environmental differences and impacts on access, use of resources and a healthy environment. This concept is related to the most disadvantaged social groups in society, with a low economic profile, or ethnic minorities who unevenly suffer the negative impacts of the environment. This is because they are in areas that may have high levels of pollutants.

There are certain key elements to deal with the issue of ecological justice, such as sustainability, respect for limits and thinking about tomorrow, the concept of environmental space and ecological footprint, as well as the principle of equal shares where equality and justice underlies in terms that all humans should have access to a healthy environment, and the same consumption opportunities in societies.

Sometimes the concepts of environmental justice and climate justice are confused. Environmental justice is a broader concept as it includes a series of elements involving aspects related to law, health, and the search for eradicating those inequalities; while climate justice is a more recent discussion related to aspects of the impacts that climate change currently has on humanity. However, in both cases, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that indigenous peoples are the most disadvantaged ones as the extreme natural phenomena have an impact on them.

For indigenous women, environmental justice is necessarily linked to the right to territory, since for indigenous peoples the territory is the space domain where their people’s lives take place, where human beings coexist with other living beings, including plants, animals, stones, and with the spirits, which are present in everything and print their distinctive characteristics.
The term environmental justice has a concept unconnected with the culture of Indigenous Peoples. However, they have made an effort to adapt the concept to their own right, greater right or law of origin since it refers to the right over territories, sacred places, traditional medicine, conservation sites. What does environmental justice mean for Indigenous Peoples?

Indigenous women link the concept of environmental justice with the certainty that, as indigenous women and peoples, they should fully enjoy the following human rights:

- right to health, dignity, culture, life,
- live in a safe and healthy environment
- enjoy clean and healthy foods.
- enjoy the inherent right to have clean water, air, land and food
- apply their traditional knowledge and practices to manage these resources
- their sons and daughters enjoy the right to be born healthy and free from toxic substances.

For indigenous women, environmental justice refers to the respect for the Indigenous Peoples’ ancestral territories, their resources and the connected livelihood. The collective right to have access to a healthy environment must be respected in order to enjoy what they have inherited from their ancestors and the collective territory must not be affected or invaded by companies that come to extract natural resources.

Environmental justice also refers to the measures that must be adopted for the restitution of that historical debt, owed by the Government, companies or external claimants in relation to the excessive extraction of resources, pollution and the sociocultural impacts in the indigenous territories and their population resulting from their actions.

The core element involving an environmental justice action is that rich countries shall acknowledge their environmental obligations towards poor countries, translated into sustainable development.

There is a difference between indigenous women’s conception of environmental justice and indigenous men’s. Women conceive environmental justice from the perspective of spirituality, food security, impact on traditional knowledge and the very structure of indigenous culture, elements related to the sowing, protection of traditional seeds and wisdom and knowledge passed on from generation to generation.

According to the Law of origin, women are responsible for being the “keepers” of secrets and seeds, and in some Indigenous Peoples that role is expressed through the abundance tree. On the other hand, men are responsible for food in relation to land care, hunting activities, lake care. They are also responsible for protecting the fishing sites. They have to take care of the territory as a “home”, which is part of the basis of the people’s future.
These two spaces are not only different, but also complementary, which is a very important aspect in indigenous cultures. These two visions work for a common goal, the preservation and respect for the rights and living well of indigenous cultures. For indigenous women, the issue of the collectivity is an essential element for cultural survival, and therefore in order to achieve a comprehensive vision of environmental justice in their lands and territories. Even so, it is important that we continue working on processes of raising people's consciousness on the differentiated impacts and the joint proposals that can be created to strengthen the people's living well.

Women's work is more linked to the land. If it is affected, their role as well as their capacity to provide for their family is restricted. Therefore, women consider that, because of their intimate relationship with land and resources, they suffer from the effects of disasters more than others, it affects them disproportionately. In general, they think that they contribute to reduce pollution, erosion of biodiversity, and face climate change.
Unit. 2.

Impact of the lack of environmental justice on indigenous women.

Impact on the worldview, traditional knowledge and territories

Let’s read and discuss:

There is a strong relationship between culture, traditional knowledge and territories. When territorial and community spaces are lost, the opportunity to pass on traditional knowledge to children and youth is lost.

In the different cultures of the Indigenous Peoples, the worldview is the basis for building relationships with the environment. This relationship is shaped by the idea of Mother Earth as the basis of the survival of indigenous cultures, which is why its preservation is important. In this context, indigenous women are well-known as caretakers of the environment and Mother Earth, specifically in that sacred relationship.

Indigenous women stated that “an essential factor of this dependence is realizing that your life revolves around the interaction with Mother Earth and that an indigenous person is born, works, reproduces and dies on earth. The indigenous identity is interdependent of the strong acknowledgement of your roots and your ancestors that inhabited that territory”. A distinctive feature of the indigenous women’s movement, which has been included into the activities linked to the struggle for environmental justice, are the healing rituals, which are part of each people’s worldview. This practice is based on the interrelationship between the spiritual elements, human beings and nature that make up their worldview.

Those relationships—that worldview—is regulated in our communities. This is what we call Community laws, the indigenous laws of the community. Those regulations also define how we relate to spirits. Spirituality is part of the daily practice of women and they have an important role in their reproduction and the responsibility to ensure that people apply those values in the community.

The territory as an identity space

The collective identity and belonging of an indigenous people’s members is determined by the territoriality, by “Mother Earth”, which is considered collective, sacred and cannot be sold or individually awarded. The territory is composed of soil, subsoil and air space (rivers, lakes, animals, plants, metals). In the territory, the legal, political, economic and social model or system for each indigenous town is developed. Therefore, from the indigenous women’s perspective, it is not possible to separate the environmental protection and defense from the struggle for the territory.

For indigenous peoples, the territory has a comprehensive spatial meaning where its people’s life is developed and where human beings coexist with other living beings, including the spirits, who are present in each thing and print its distinct features in that relationship with the territory and its natural resources. These visions on land and territory differ from the classic perception that usua-
lly reduces a territory to a set of productive resources delimited by administrative or proprietary political boundaries. For the indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, territoriality reflects the level of ownership and consolidation between a people and its territory and, it specially refers to:

- The people’s self-identification with their territory. That identification is mainly by community.
- The coherence between the territory and the community authority, expressed through the ancestral governance structures, which is the representative organization.
- The collective right to use natural resources in the territory, including the actual degree of control.

Lands, territories and natural resources (TTR) have special meanings for indigenous women around the world. They represent the coexistence of the human being with Mother Nature, which is the very life of the earth, water, forests, plants, animals and all the components of habitats and ecosystems. The relationship between indigenous women and the territory is based on respecting, caring for and feeding life so that in return it cares for and nourishes current generations. There is a connection of responsibility between women, ancestors and future generations. The earth, in a few words, is assumed as sacred.

It is necessary to take effective actions in the responsible governance of indigenous territories that enable women’s participation, in order to have more balanced and effective management systems for indigenous peoples. It can be achieved through the strengthening of grassroots women’s organizations, since the leadership establishing the arrangements for use and access to the land and resources of their territory is usually male. Likewise, women must be provided with tools to be able to negotiate and encourage actions enabling a greater participation in the administration of resources and access to them.

**Impact on the creation of protected areas**

Traditional indigenous territories, covering around 22% of the planet’s surface, match with areas where 80% of the world’s biological diversity is found. The creation of protected areas has led to the overlap between the traditional territories of indigenous peoples and the areas where the highest levels of biological diversity are present.

A protected area means a defined conservation area, adopting different conservation modalities such as national parks and forests, shelters of wild flora and fauna, marine zones, private reserves and reserves administered by non-governmental organizations, protected areas of indigenous peoples, community lands and other areas where the protection of nature and the practice of sustainable subsistence encourage the integrity of ecosystems.

All the indigenous peoples maintain strong spiritual ties with plants, trees and animals living in their ancestral territories and it is a sacred duty to protect them. Therefore, there are two visions on the issue related to protected areas: one is focused on the conservation of a space where the population and access to resources are separated; while the other vision integrates the importance of including social sectors in the conservation processes of protected areas considering that governance through local and community institutions provides spaces for greater access control and use of natural resources.
In many countries, indigenous peoples continue dealing with the legacy of these human rights violations: land expropriation, forced displacement, restricted exercise of autonomy and self-government, lack of access to subsistence means, restricted access to sacred sites, loss of culture, lack of acknowledgment by their own authorities and denied access to legal redress, including restitution and compensation.

Ecological or environmental violence and indigenous women

Indigenous women have defined ecological or environmental violence as the deliberate and lethal exposure to pesticides, mining waste and other sources of toxic pollution. In different meetings, they have acknowledge that there is a relationship between environmental toxic substances and reproductive health, as well as the impacts generated by environmental violence. Some impacts identified by them include the following:

- Contaminants in breast milk, which in some indigenous communities is from 4 to 12 times greater than that of the mother’s body tissue;
- Increased levels of contaminants, such as Persistent Organic Pollutants and heavy metals in the blood of the newborn’s umbilical cord;
- Disproportionate cancer levels of the reproductive system in the breast, ovaries, uterus, prostate and testicles, which is also affecting young people;
- High rates of respiratory diseases such as asthma and obstructive pulmonary disease;
- High levels of leukemia and other types of cancer in babies, children and young people;
- Types of cancer previously unknown and unusual in our communities and present at all ages;
- Degenerative and, in many cases, lethal congenital anomalies, which are highly related to environmental toxins such as nuclear waste, the effects resulting from mining activities and pesticides, and which include, in the most contaminated areas, the birth of more and more boneless babies (jelly babies);
- Developmental delays, learning difficulties and neurological effects in infants and young children, resulting in permanent sequelae associated with prenatal exposure to mercury, pesticides and other environmental toxins;
- An increase in the number of miscarriages and stillbirths, and
- High levels of sterility and infertility in contaminated communities

In this regard, the Special Rapporteur on toxic substances pointed out before the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2017, that his predeces-
sors had pointed out for decades the impact of contaminants on the rights of indigenous peoples, since these are present in the lands, territories and natural resources of indigenous communities, not as a consequence of their decisions, but as a result of abuse and lack of respect for their individual and collective rights. He added that this is a global problem, since it occurs in all socio-cultural regions and stated the following effects: cancer, abortions, congenital defects, learning limitations, diabetes and all linked to the presence of pesticides, toxic chemicals and other problems environmental.

**Impact on the right to food and food sovereignty**

Indigenous Peoples’ food systems are deeply linked to ancestral relationships with their territories, their own norms, lifestyles, identity, culture and spirituality. Women and men play a decisive role in the nature care and develop, from an early age, skills to use plants and other elements to produce food, medicine and spiritual activities. It has ensured the continuity of their food systems and their means of production, despite adversities, thus accumulating knowledge, experiences, demonstrating adaptability and resilience.

Their types of traditional food are passed on from generation to generation through songs, legends, their languages and examples. Their worldviews are expressed through spiritual, cultural, social and productive practices involving the spirits, the moon, the stars, human beings, which explains the logic of productive diversification, reducing the risk of losses, bad seasons and ensuring food security. Throughout the cycle of food production, they practice values such as reciprocity and complementarity, thus strengthening their own economic institutions.

The nutritional status of indigenous people is determined by factors linked to the changing living conditions that communities have to deal with, such as environmental degradation, contamination of their traditional ecosystems, loss of their lands and territories and decrease in their traditional food sources or access to them, migration and growing urbanization. The effect has resulted in nutritional problems such as chronic malnutrition, risk of malnutrition and overweight.

The identified obstacles which prevent from improving the nutrition status include the following: a) loss of traditional types of production; b) low production performance; c) impact of development models and use of resources; d) effects of natural disasters; e) ownership and security of the collective natural heritage (land, territory, natural resources, traditional knowledge).

**Criminalization in the struggle for environmental justice**

At the global level, the struggles for natural resources replicate and strengthen the social inequalities which indigenous peoples go through. In the search for the defense of environmental rights and the search for environmental justice, Indigenous Peoples have carried out manifestations and protests so that their awarded rights are not undermined before external interests in their territories.

Headquarters, New York, New York
The criminalization of indigenous rights defenders and leaders seems to be an action encouraged by the Governments around the world, in prejudice of human rights, giving preference to national economic interests. The defense of indigenous territories against external interests, mining, hydroelectric projects, protected areas, development projects carried out without the consent of the communities is increasing every day, and the participation of indigenous women in this defense has been active and therefore, they have been subject to violence and criminalization.
Unit 3.

Main strategies and practices encouraged by indigenous women to achieve environmental justice

The practices and strategies used above aimed at reaffirming indigenous women as subjects of collective rights, that is, women who belong to Indigenous Peoples. They seek that measures can protect them and all the members of their communities, that is, that their individual human rights as persons are complemented by the collective human rights as members of Indigenous Peoples.

The impact of colonization has resulted into a chain of rights violations expressed in the women's bodies and transcending towards the environment; as well as intergenerational traumas terribly affecting entire communities. However, the approaches of indigenous women not only cover their own spaces and interests, but also transcend towards other people and communities, including the business industry.

The conception and practice of struggling for environmental justice by indigenous women is complex, multidimensional and collective, including the entire community and men. Four interrelated and complementary core strategies can be identified, namely:

1. Social mobilization would allow to visualize the situation and articulate the demand
2. Comprehensive healing for living well
3. Revitalization and promotion of productive systems and indigenous traditional foods
4. Advocacy, use of legal channels and encouragement of environmental rights regulations

It is about moving from reflection to action, applying different strategies. One of the strategies will be written down in cards so that they can discuss in small groups on how they can put it into practice to achieve environmental justice: advocacy, communication, political mobilization, creation of alliances, comprehensive healing, cultural revitalization, valorization of traditional knowledge, revitalization of production and food systems. You can add others. Contributions of the members will be shared in groups and the facilitator will make a summary harmonizing the own knowledge with the text below.
The measures consisted in the creation and/or strengthening of indigenous women’s organizations in order to participate in the responsible governance of the indigenous territory, natural resources management, and social mobilization to express, draw the attention and communicate their demands for environmental justice.

Some activities included:

**Organización:**
- Organize themselves as women to raise demands for territorial rights
- Strengthen the organization and coordination among indigenous women in order to participate in territorial governance
- Women’s Organization in order to protect the community’s natural resources
- Support the recovery and/or strengthening of traditional territorial governance institutions
- Raise mixed indigenous organizations’ awareness in order to ensure women’s participation in the environmental management
- Articulation through social media, alliances, synergies and assistance in processes in different areas in search of environmental justice

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4 Responsible governance of tenure (FAO, 2012) The governance of tenure can be considered responsible when it is fair and equitable and seeks to offer the greatest possible benefit to the majority of people, while minimizing the negative repercussions for individuals or groups; when it takes into account the principle of sustainability; and, it is in line with international human rights.
Visibility and communication of demands:

- Through the visibility of women defenders and processes led by indigenous women
- Through conventional means of communication
- Campaign for the visibility of IIWF-FAO indigenous women
- NOTIMIA photography contest
- Using their own media and communication strategies
- Indigenous women recipients of awards linked to Environmental Justice, make visible their peoples’ issues
- IIWF Award - Environmental Justice
- Award from the Goldman Environmental Foundation
- Champions of the Earth Award

The fact is that indigenous women have always participated in the struggles of their people jointly with men; however, they have generally been made invisible. Therefore, another practice applied by them consisted in making their contributions to the struggle visible, dealing with the challenge of making individual contributions visible, but as a complement to the collective struggle of other women and often of other members in their communities.

Revitalization and encouragement of productive systems and indigenous traditional foods

- Linking the indigenous worldview with the production systems and traditional foods
- Visibility and valuation of indigenous knowledge in production practices and traditional foods
- Own initiatives applying productive diversification and protection of native seeds
- Add value to traditional products: processing and search for a fair market

The indigenous production systems are based on the work of nuclear and extended families, and sometimes with the community participation. In addition to being creators of family jobs and generating income for family well-be-

5 http://notimia.com/conv_notimia2018/
ing, these are systems that coexist with the environment, seeking reproduction of non-synthetic fertility and soil, lagoons and water sources protection.

In the organization and development of traditional productive systems, women’s work and roles are decisive and multiple. They contribute to the continuity and passing on of cultures, sustainable agriculture, fishing, horticulture, forestry, health, food systems and production, including the preservation of biodiversity through seed banks. The strategy, therefore, includes several activities and approaches, own initiatives applying productive diversification and protection of native seeds.

Diversified productive activities (economic pluralism) include fruit other species harvesting, fishing, soil, waters, traditional seeds care and protection, specific activities (sowing, harvesting, care), handicraft activities (weaving, others), cattle care, water lifting and even protect the collective environmental resources in the communities (Role in the land use regulations (conservation areas, reproduction of species, sacred sites, planting areas, fishing, etc.).

Traditional production and food encouragement has been combined with the search for adding value to the products and the search for fair and alternative market options.

**Political advocacy, use of legal channels and encouragement of environmental rights regulations**

- Political mobilizations
- Indigenous women sharing mixed leadership
- Advocacy for mobilization in academic platforms
- Advocacy to encourage national public policies using global processes, agreements, and recommendations as a frame of reference (ODS, Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in the UN)
- Advocacy through the revitalization and encouragement in health policies for indigenous traditional medicine
- Use of legal channels

Environmental justice implies the possibility that people can appeal to the court in order to request the environmental protection, if there is no way or mechanism to defend the environment, natural resources or animals, we ourselves would be affected. I think that at present the struggle is mostly leaning in our favor when indigenous women are part of the demands in defense of precisely the environment or natural resources. Unfortunately, indigenous women put their lives at risk when they are at the forefront of this struggle.
Unit 4.

Individual and collective healing in the struggle for environmental justice.

Indigenous women have added healing rituals into the activities linked to the struggle for environmental justice that are part of every people's worldview and are explained by the interrelation between the spiritual elements, human beings and nature.

For indigenous women, healing is a set of knowledge and ancestral practices passed on by grandmothers and grandfathers, and spiritual guides, which are part of the Peoples’ worldview, which serve to maintain, restore balance and harmony of the individual and collective being; to prevent harm, release from impotence, pain, fear, fright, anger and guilt. They also use it to internalize the oppression they are going through and help them to return to themselves, to acknowledge themselves and to be acknowledged again in their dignity and integrity. Healing can take place individually, in family and community, since it is a “communal institution” used by Indigenous Peoples to find justice, and try to regain harmony and balance.

Healing is used for:
- strengthening indigenous institutions, regulatory systems and authorities’ systems, recover and strengthen ancestral governance structures.
- recovering collective dignity and self-esteem
- read through the candle, copal, corn in order to accurately know where a person’s root of illness is located, what has been the breaking factor of the harmony, in order to make the rituals and offerings or cleansings.
- Relieving body's physical pains,
- cleansing and purifying the soul,
- strengthening the heart, purifying the blood, curing several diseases,
- keeping family, community and cultural ties healthy.

Some rituals take place in rivers, mountains, caves, roads, places where strong energies are present. Rituals are performed in agricultural and forestry practices, in seed selection. There are sowing and harvest rites, passage rites between life cycles: birth, puberty, marriage and death.

“Healing” is a set of practices and knowledge to which indigenous peoples resort—as a kind of individual and collective therapy—to achieve their reconstitution as dignified, productive and balanced people, families and communities. Healing is nourished by each people’s worldview, and each context offers the physical and symbolic cultural elements that are used for healing rituals. Spirituality is the core element of healing rituals. It is the relationship of human beings with the material and immaterial world. For indigenous peoples, not only the human being has soul and life, but also everything that comes from nature and lives in it and therefore have a great healing power.

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7 IIWF, 2013.