

Madam Deputy Secretary-General, Madam High Commissioner,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It gives me great pleasure to address the first session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and to welcome members and observer delegations.

In my capacity as Senior Vice-President of the ECOSOC last year, and its President this year, I have taken a close interest in everything that has been happening in preparation for this historic event. As you know, it fell upon the President of ECOSOC to appoint the 8 indigenous members of the Permanent Forum, so I have become familiar with the names and peoples of the indigenous candidates. I must say that ECOSOC had a difficult task as we tried to balance geographical and gender representation with diversity of experience of the members of the Forum. Selection was made even more sensitive because of the high personal qualities of many candidates. I therefore take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all those who took part in the selection process. I am sure that some excellent indigenous candidates, who were not appointed this time, will serve as members of the Forum in future. I would also like to congratulate to all members of the Forum and remind them that whether they have been candidates of governments or indigenous peoples themselves, they will be serving in the Forum in their expert capacity. I hope that they will be successful in reaching consensus and that their first proposals and recommendations will be submitted to ECOSOC very soon.

It is a source of great personal satisfaction to see that the Permanent Forum is now established and about to begin its work. Back in 1993 in Vienna, I served as Vice-President of the World Conference on Human Rights when the proposal to consider the creation of a new, high-level body for indigenous peoples was launched. After almost a decade of efforts, we finally have such a body through which we can include indigenous peoples in the United Nations and its deliberations.

Dear members of the Forum, dear representatives of the indigenous peoples and organizations who are present here today, welcome to the UN family!

The Permanent Forum is an innovative organ. It is characterized by its unique membership, composed of indigenous and non-indigenous experts, and by the principle of inclusion of all concerned in its work. Since the work of the Permanent Forum is open to all indigenous representatives, whether or not they belong to organizations accredited with ECOSOC, we can conclude that we have created a very open, transparent and participatory body.

I am particularly pleased to see that the room has been organized in such a way as to group indigenous peoples and Member States so that they are not in concentric circles with NGOs on the outside. I believe that such a configuration will stimulate dialogue, exchange and mutual respect. The spirit of cooperation is a prerequisite for the success of the Forum in fulfilling its challenging tasks: to establish a work plan, and to formulate its first proposals and recommendations to ECOSOC as its parent body.

Dear members of the Forum,

Allow me to make some modest suggestions regarding the work of your first session. ECOSOC, of course, awaits with interest your first report containing information about your activities and recommendations. I would encourage you to be concrete and focused when you prepare your report since governments like to have very clear recommendations to consider.

I would also like to propose that you consider how you might contribute to two important events that will be taking place over the next months. The first is the high-level segment that the ECOSOC will be holding in July on the improvement of human resources, especially in areas of education and health. Many health and education ministers will attend the high-level segment, and it is a great opportunity to address the special needs and problems of indigenous peoples in these areas. The outcome document of the high-level segment will be based on various inputs of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies – including possibly the Forum's as well – and will hopefully lead to the improvement of national policies.

The second event is the World conference on sustainable development. Many of you are actively participating in the preparatory process of the Rio plus 10 meeting in Johannesburg, and I encourage you to continue to do so. Nonetheless, taking into account the importance of sustainable development for indigenous peoples and new potentials that the Forum provides for, the members might consider how Forum could contribute to this important meeting.

Finally, dear colleagues and friends, let me conclude.

The establishment of the Permanent Forum on indigenous issues as a high-level subsidiary organ of ECOSOC is a great victory and a cause for celebration. However, establishment of the Forum is just the beginning: the Forum provides for opportunities that should be carefully explored and its potentials should be developed through practical experience.

The Forum represents a chance to make up for at least some of the numerous injustices to which indigenous peoples have been exposed throughout history. It cannot create miracles, but it can make a difference. It is a powerful tool to provide and disseminate information on indigenous peoples and to help to improve their social and economic position. It can, among others, contribute to better protection of human rights, cultural heritage, language, environment and health and education of indigenous peoples.

As President of ECOSOC, I will always be at the Forum's disposal, especially during its first steps. I am looking forward to your first proposals and recommendations very much, and I hope that ECOSOC will be able to review them as early as during our substantial session in July. Once again, welcome to the UN family and I wish you very successful deliberations.