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Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

Fifth session

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Ongoing priorities and themes

Information received from the United Nations system

Note by the Secretariat

Commonwealth Secretariat

Summary

This is the first report of the Commonwealth Secretariat and it describes policies, activities and plans of the Commonwealth Secretariat regarding indigenous issues.

Commonwealth Approach to Indigenous Issues

1. The Commonwealth, as a community of 53 member states with shared histories, and values of development and democracy, recognised in 1979, that indigenous peoples may require special provisions to improve their socio-economic situations. The key statement on indigenous issues by Heads of Government was made at the Lusaka Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 1979, in which they recognised that “special attention” needs to be paid to “the problems of indigenous minorities”.ⁱ

2. The Commonwealth also recognised the needs and rights of indigenous peoples in the report of the Commonwealth Expert Group on Development and Democracy which was considered by the Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Abuja, Nigeria, in 2003. Entitled, ‘Making Democracy Work for Pro-Poor Development’, the report recognised the economic, social and political constraints faced by indigenous peoples. Particular mention was made of indigenous people’s poor health status and their often constrained access to land. By emphasising that democracy requires the strengthening and preservation of a political culture which respects human rights, including the group or collective rights of indigenous peoples, the report underscored the need for Commonwealth governments to heed the special concerns and rights of indigenous peoples and strive to meet their needs. The report also highlighted the need for policies that contribute to cultural diversity and stressed the importance of political representation of marginalised groups including indigenous peoples.ⁱⁱ

3. At their 7th meeting in the Fiji Islands in 2004, Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women’s Affairs recognized for the first time, the particular discriminations and disadvantages faced by indigenous women and their

communities. Ministers committed themselves to work on the issue through the recommendations outlined in the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015. The PoA thus made a commitment to promote “the rights of indigenous peoples, especially women, in political, social, economic and cultural spheres”.

4. The Gender Section of the Social Transformation Programmes Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat is mandated to assist member governments and other key stakeholders in implementing the PoA. The convening of a Pan-Commonwealth Conference on Gender, Youth and Indigenous Peoples, to be held in mid-2006, is the first step by the Commonwealth in addressing indigenous issues from gender and youth perspectives. The conference will seek to identify the issues facing indigenous women and young people in Commonwealth countries and identify ways to advance their situation at various levels. Most of the background papers for the conference have been written by indigenous peoples.

5. The objectives of the Pan-Commonwealth Conference are to:

- (a) Raise policy awareness on the multiple discriminations faced by indigenous communities, particularly women, men and young people, and offer a holistic perspective on indigenous peoples’ rights.
- (b) Provide a gender dimension to the socio-economic situations experienced by indigenous peoples.
- (c) Forward to governments substantive recommendations for improving the lives of indigenous peoples through policy formulation and practice.

6. In meeting the above objectives, the conference will seek to highlight the inter-connectedness of indigenous peoples’ situations, the achievement of the Millennium

Development Goals, and the realisation of their human rights. The conference will also highlight that the attainment of equitable natural resource distribution and sustainable biodiversity management will contribute to the preservation of indigenous knowledge and culture.

ⁱ Declaration of the Commonwealth on Racism and Racial Prejudice, 1979.

ⁱⁱ Commonwealth Expert Group on Development and Democracy, 'Making Democracy Work for Pro-Poor Development', Commonwealth Secretariat, 2003.