

## Second Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

**Introductory remarks by Johan Schölvinnck**  
**Director Division for Social Policy and Development**  
**Department of Economic and Social Affairs**

**12 May 2003**

Distinguished Members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Honourable Elders, distinguished representatives of Member States, Indigenous Organizations and Non-governmental Organizations, Ladies and gentlemen,

1. It gives me great pleasure to participate in the opening part of the Second Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and to join my colleagues in welcoming the Members of the Forum to the United Nations Headquarters in New York.
2. I also wish to welcome the observer participants representing governments, UN system organizations, NGOs and indigenous peoples, nations and communities. I am delighted that we have so many people here in New York and want to thank those of you, who have travelled from far away for making the effort to take part in this important session.
3. The President of the Economic and Social Council, H.E. Ambassador Gert Rosenthal, Permanent Representative of Guatemala, has been invited and has accepted to address the Permanent Forum but, due to his travel obligations, the President will be addressing the Forum on its last day, 23 May.

Mr. Chairman,

4. The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is a pioneering body and I draw your attention to its unique composition of indigenous and non-indigenous experts and underline the fact that for the first time in the history of the UN, indigenous peoples are members and part owners, so to speak, of a high level permanent organ. I have noted the presence in the Forum of indigenous observers from all over the world. This means that the Forum will benefit from the participation of community representatives, Elders, women's and youth groups, indigenous teachers and health professionals, and many other types of organizations. This diversity, in my view, greatly enriches the work of the Forum, gives it further legitimacy, and ensures a remarkable depth of experience.
5. A number of years ago it was the insightful vision and wisdom of Member States and indigenous peoples' organizations, that resulted in January of this year, in the establishment of the Secretariat for the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. I say vision and wisdom because I believe that DESA, like the participants in this session, has a great deal of experience to bring to

the support of the Permanent Forum and to ensure the effective implementation of its mandate.

6. By being placed in DESA, the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum has access to expertise ranging across many areas of economic and social development; traditional forest related knowledge; environmental issues; expertise on poverty eradication and unemployment; ageing and older person's issues; gender and the advancement of women; family issues; youth issues; population and demographics; migration; disability issues; and statistics. Thus, in choosing DESA as their new home, so to speak, indigenous peoples have broadened their human rights struggle by encompassing the full breadth of their lived experiences. Hence the mandate of the Forum includes not just human rights but also and most importantly economic and social development, environment, health, culture and education.

7. Allow me to bring to your attention some recent developments, including the concerted efforts by DESA to ensure that the Second Session is a success. An interim team of devoted staff members has been assigned within the Division for Social Policy and Development of DESA with the responsibility of ensuring smooth preparations for the Forum since the General Assembly and the Secretary-General designated DESA as the host department for the Secretariat for the Permanent Forum. In this regard it is worth noting that the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was established on 27 January 2003, thanks to the swift cooperation between DESA and OHCHR. And swift it was. The speed by which the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum was established is virtually unique in the annals of the United Nations. However, considering the time-frame that was left between the end of January and the start of the Second Session of only some three and a half months, much had to be accomplished in very little time.

8. As you know, the functions of the Secretariat for the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues are designated in General Assembly resolution 57/191 and document A/57/7/Add.19. Its central function is providing substantive assistance and support to the Permanent Forum in carrying out its mandate.

9. To this end, the staff of the Secretariat has met with interested parties in the past few months, who could potentially contribute to the work of the Forum. I have noted from such meetings that there is great interest and a real desire among Member States, UN agencies and others to cooperate in ensuring that the Forum will be a success.

10. A number of activities show how this can be achieved. These involve, among others:

- a. coordinating inputs of the United Nations system to the programme of work of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; chairing the Intra-departmental Task Force within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs for the Permanent Forum;

- b. representing and advocating the policies of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues before United Nations policy-making bodies, agencies, programmes and funds; providing support to the Chair of the Inter-agency Support Group;
- c. pursuing the integration of indigenous issues within the inter-governmental and inter-agency system; consulting with representatives of Members States, indigenous organizations, academia and others concerned with a view to implementing the programme of work of the Forum;
- d. implementing activities for raising awareness of indigenous issues among non-governmental organizations, the media, academia and civil society at large; and last but not least,
- e. administering the Voluntary Fund for the Permanent Forum.

11. This most important Fund has now been formally established by the Controller and a note verbale has been sent to all States inviting contributions. It is now possible to commence donations to the Fund immediately and I take this opportunity to encourage prospective donors to consider contributing to this fund which is an essential component in the support for the Forum.

12. For example, at its First Session, the Permanent Forum had requested various activities, including a study and a workshop on data-collection. We hope that DESA, together with other members of the Inter-Agency Support Group will be able to launch this work once planning is in place and resources are available. Data-collection and statistics was a chief recommendation of the First Session and the Inter-Agency Support Group has eagerly responded with a *United Nations Common Discussion Paper on Data Collection and Disaggregation* contained in document E/C.19/2003/4. This document will greatly assist the Permanent Forum in setting out the way forward with this issue. DESA's Statistics Division, will, I hope, be in a position to assist the Permanent Forum in the first steps of establishing a clear picture of the state of the World's indigenous peoples. To this end DESA, has also undertaken a new initiative: its flagship "*Report on the World's Social Situation*", this year, for the first time, will include a chapter entitled "*Indigenous Peoples: vulnerabilities and policy responses - a social perspective*".

Mr Chairman,

13. Our work until now in the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum, during the brief period of its existence, has already allowed us to see the potential and the possibilities that exist for the mandate of the Permanent Forum to be promoted and for indigenous issues to be integrated in public policies. And at the same time we have also seen the limitations and challenges of what a small secretariat like ours can do. We trust in your continuing support, the support of Member States, to face together the potential and the challenge that the Permanent Forum has placed before us for the betterment of indigenous peoples' lives.

14. Finally Mr. Chairman, this meeting of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at United Nations Headquarters in New York is not only of symbolic significance, it is foremost of significance because it places the issues confronting indigenous peoples in a high-profile political and developmental context. It signifies the first and crucial step in mainstreaming indigenous issues into the work of the Organization, rather than having them dealt with at the margins of our work. In short, welcome to the heart of the United Nations.

Thank you.

-----