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Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Fourth Session
1st & 2nd Meetings (AM & PM)

PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES OPENS FOURTH SESSION

WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In Efforts to Achieve Goals, Indigenous People Must Not Be Forgotten, Discriminated Against or Marginalized, Forum Told

Indigenous people in many nations were still among the poorest and most marginalized, and their communities were often victimized by the effects of armed conflict, Deputy Secretary-General Louise Fréchette told the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, as it opened its fourth session this morning.

She added that Member States had still not adopted the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, despite many years of negotiation and advocacy. Indigenous people and the international community must draw up a concrete plan of action leading to measurably improved standards of living and greater respect for indigenous rights.

Commending the Forum for this year's focus on the Millennium Development Goals, she said it could contribute to the September review of those goals by assessing progress and obstacles in its own experience. Indigenous people must not be forgotten, discriminated against, or remain marginalized in efforts to achieve the Millennium Goals.

Bringing together some 1,500 indigenous leaders, activists and representatives, this year's Forum is focusing on indigenous people and the Millennium Development Goals of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, and achieving universal primary education. Its ultimate aim is to draw up recommendations for the United Nations system, based on discussion in its mandated areas of economic and social development, environment, health, human rights, culture and education.

Addressing the Millennium Goal on poverty, Nana Effah-Apenteng (Ghana), Acting President of the General Assembly, stressed that the poverty faced by millions of indigenous people must be eradicated if the Millennium Goals were to be achieved. Emphasizing the need to consider development models needed by indigenous people, she said too many indigenous groups faced threats to their land, natural resources, identities and even existence. Indigenous perspectives should be integrated into the Millennium Goals process, using local and national priorities for their implementation and evaluation.

During the afternoon panel discussion on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, several speakers highlighted the link between poverty and human rights, noting that those born into poverty remained where they were unless relevant rights were implemented. Pointing to studies showing that extreme poverty impacted disproportionately on indigenous people, Louise Arbour, High Commissioner for Human Rights emphasized that such groups had a right to participate fully in development efforts. Poverty reduction programmes should not lead to injustices against indigenous peoples, such as depriving them of their lands or traditional means of existence.

Underscoring the importance of community involvement in reducing poverty, Jeffrey Sachs, United Nations Millennium Project Director and Adviser to the Secretary-General, stressed the importance of considering the specific conditions of each community. Comparing the Forum's goals to those of the Millennium Project, he said they both focused on local empowerment and active community participation in their own futures. Facing geographical challenges was a large part of that effort, as was raising the contributions of the wealthier countries to community development.

Other participants stressed the need for governments to fulfil their commitments to follow a rights-based approach to development and the reduction of poverty, emphasizing the benefits of adhering to fundamental human rights. They also pointed to the importance of indigenous participation in drawing up Millennium Goal poverty reduction strategy papers. In addition, several focused on environmental issues and poverty, with one speaker noting that the impact of animal rights campaigns on renewable resource use had been harsh, often restricting the hunting of animals in no danger of extinction.

In other business today, the Forum elected Victoria Tauli-Corpuz as its Chairperson; Hassan Id Balkassm, Otilia Lux de Coti, Ida Nicolaisen and Pavel Sulyandziga as its Vice-Chairpersons; and Michael Dodson as Rapporteur. It also adopted its agenda for the session (document E/C.19/2005/1).

The session was opened with a traditional procession of indigenous Peruvian children and youth, accompanied by harp and violin. Radford Quamahongwewa, War Chief and Spokesperson for the elders and leaders of the Hopi Indian Nation village of Shangopau, then offered words of blessing in his native tongue.

Following the opening ceremony, Forum Chairperson Tauli-Corpuz invited participants to observe a minute of silence in memory of Njuma Ekundanayo, the late expert member from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Also speaking during the opening ceremony were Rachel Mayanja, Assistant-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, and Johan Verbeke, Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Other speakers during the afternoon panel discussion included Mark Malloch Brown, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Chairman of the United Nations Development Group (UNDG), as well as representatives of the Interagency Support Group (IASG), the International Labour Organization (ILO), UN-HABITAT, United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

The Forum will meet again at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, 17 May, to continue its discussion on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger.

Background

The Permanent Forum on indigenous issues met today to open its fourth session, elect its officers, and adopt the organization of work. It was expected to hold a high-level panel and dialogue on the session's theme of the Millennium Development Goals and indigenous people. (For background information, see Press Release HR/4836 of 13 May.)

Opening Ceremony

RACHEL MAYANJA, Assistant-Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Acting Chair of the Forum, declared the session open, followed by a traditional procession of indigenous youth from Peru, accompanied by harp and violin.

RADFORD QUAMAHONGWEWA, War Chief and Spokesperson for the elders and leaders of the village of Shangopau of the Hopi Indian Nation, offered words of blessing for the session in his native tongue.

LOUISE FRÉCHETTE, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, said the relationship between indigenous peoples and the United Nations had come a long way over the past 10 years. The Forum was playing a catalytic role in forging partnerships between indigenous peoples, governments and the United Nations system, and the appointment of a Special Rapporteur for human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people had strengthened protection mechanisms available to indigenous peoples. However, indigenous people had continued to be among the poorest and the most marginalized in many nations, and their communities were often disproportionately victimized by the effects of armed conflict. Moreover, Member States had still not adopted the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, despite many years of negotiation and advocacy. She urged indigenous peoples and the international community to draw up a concrete plan of action pointing the way towards measurably improved standards of living and greater respect for human rights.

She said indigenous women deserved special mention for their tremendous courage and persistence in guiding and supporting their communities. They had also mobilized at the international level, actively participating in the Forum and contributing to general United Nations work on advancing women. Implementation of agreed commitments had remained inadequate, but indigenous women were being heard more widely than before. Governments, the intergovernmental system and civil society must listen more closely to what those voices were saying.

She added that it was entirely appropriate for this year's Forum to focus on indigenous peoples and the Millennium Development Goals, which were of direct concern to indigenous people, she said. The Forum could contribute to the September review by assessing both progress and obstacles through its own experience. Indigenous peoples must not be forgotten, discriminated against or remain marginalized in efforts to achieve those goals.

VICTORIA TAULI-CORPUZ, Chairperson of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, said that neither the Forum nor governments could act alone in developing more coordinated and effective responses to challenges facing indigenous peoples. The Forum's value was that it put actors together to discuss and produce concrete results in promoting indigenous rights and development, and its strength was in facing those challenges head on. Worsening poverty and gross human rights violations were still the lot of many indigenous people in both developing and developed countries, as was the continuing lack of benefits from globalization.

She noted that the Forum had considerably increased the visibility and awareness of indigenous issues at the international level over the past few years. An average of 1,200 participants had attended each session, including the representatives of some 70 Member States and indigenous organizations worldwide. The quality of participation in terms of substance and ideas had made the Forum a global event that should not be missed. The challenge was to translate the fresh ideas and recommendations emerging from the past three sessions.

The Forum's political role was increasing coordination among members of the Inter-agency Support Group, she said, which had seen the added value to working together at various levels in responding to indigenous issues. Official visits of Forum members to agencies had resulted in joint projects in indigenous development. The Forum was also a platform and catalyst for emerging and challenging issues such as free, prior and informed consent (on development projects, for example) and data collection on indigenous issues. Further, it was a space for promoting solidarity and networking, allowing for further discussion and joint planning, as well as common action.

NANA EFFAH-APENTENG ([Ghana](#)), Acting President of the General Assembly, said it was encouraging that indigenous issues were being linked to the priorities of the United Nations, i.e., peace and security and human rights and development. The General Assembly, for its part, had been following the Forum's deliberations over the past three sessions.

Poverty faced by millions of indigenous people must be eradicated, he said, if the Millennium Development Goals were to be achieved. In doing so, indigenous people must be part of development processes. In addition, the development models desired and needed by indigenous peoples should be considered. Too many of them face challenges in respect of their land, their natural resources, their identities and even their existence.

The Programme of Action for the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, proclaimed by the General Assembly last December, must be action-oriented and also linked to the Millennium Development Goals. Indigenous perspectives should be integrated into the Millennium Goals process from the setting of local and national priorities to their implementation and evaluation. Work must be done to make sure that the international community met its commitments to indigenous peoples by the end of the Second Decade, which coincided with the timeframe for the Millennium Development Goals.

JOHAN VERBEKE, Vice-President of Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), speaking on behalf of ECOSOC President Jose Antonio Ocampo, noted that the Forum had significantly increased the visibility of indigenous issues at the international level, and had become a foremost body for dialogue between indigenous peoples, the United Nations system and States. It had also created a valuable space for cooperation with the intergovernmental system through its comprehensive recommendations in all areas of its mandate.

Evidence had suggested that the majority of about 370 million indigenous people worldwide faced extreme poverty and had no access to education, inadequate education, or no access to bilingual primary education in both the dominant language and mother tongue. It was imperative to understand the concerns of indigenous peoples and integrate their perspectives into Millennium Goal implementation and review. Indigenous peoples should be made visible in Millennium Development Goals reports, reports of intergovernmental bodies and other relevant reports. Disaggregated data should be developed so that the situation of indigenous peoples became clearer and their problems were addressed.

RACHEL MAYANJA, Assistant-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, said that the Permanent Forum evidenced extraordinary partnerships built over the past 40 years in the United Nations, which should be duplicated at the regional, national and local levels. She welcomed the increase in the engagement of the United Nations system and others in the work of the Forum and in the development of related policies. Inspired by that trend, the Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues had solidified its position, expanded its membership and provided substantive input to the Forum. The Forum had also become a point of reference for major reports of the United Nations system, and outreach through the website had increased awareness and networking.

Despite such institutional achievements, indigenous people continued to face great challenges in their daily lives, she said. Their marginalization, extreme poverty, discrimination and other human rights violations should no longer be tolerated. They should, instead, be full partners in sustainable development. For that to happen, implementation of the Forum's recommendations was more urgent than ever. She, therefore, encouraged the Forum to strengthen its monitoring and implementation mechanisms.

In her capacity as the Secretary-General's adviser on gender issues, she expressed pleasure at seeing many women in attendance. The results of last year's focus on women should become an integral part of the deliberations of this session and other intergovernmental processes. She then drew attention to the strategic priorities of the United Nations Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, and highlighted the close collaboration between the Secretariat of the Forum and the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality.

High-Level Panel

Opening the afternoon meeting, VICTORIA TAULI-CORPUZ, Chairperson of the Permanent Forum, introduced the high-level panel on poverty eradication. She said the Forum had shown vision in

choosing the Millennium Development Goals as the theme for the next few sessions. Data aggregation of Goal indicators based on ethnicity was crucial, because the Millennium Goal country reports usually did not reflect the realities for indigenous groups. If the Goal process did not take into account such people, they would continue to be marginalized.

Extreme poverty and hunger among indigenous peoples, she said, had a direct relationship to their alienation from their lands and resources. In that light, the Millennium Goal review process should be used to analyse whether Forum recommendations were being implemented. Further steps also needed to be taken to address other indigenous issues. She urged participants to consider how the Millennium Goal machinery could better be used to forward the interests of indigenous people.

LOUISE ARBOUR, High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that the Millennium Development Goals were cross-cutting concerns that involved the entire United Nations system. Poverty was a denial of human rights -- the right to food, adequate housing and the right to be fairly remunerated for work. It was also a denial of the right to dignity. Poverty was inherited, and those born into poverty would continue to be poor unless relevant rights were implemented. For that reason, poverty would remain high on her own priorities as Commissioner.

She said many studies showed that extreme poverty impacted disproportionately on indigenous peoples. The struggle against such poverty should be undertaken from a human rights perspective, in a way that affected all groups. Indigenous peoples had a right to participate fully in development efforts. Most importantly, poverty reduction programmes should not result in injustices against indigenous peoples, such as moving them off their lands or depriving them of their traditional means of existence.

It was crucial to understand the Millennium Goal commitments as commitments to implement human rights, she said. The best form of assistance allowed the poor to assert their rights. Part of that could be achieved through the establishment of national and international obligations.

In other areas, she looked forward to a breakthrough, in the months ahead, on the United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. She also gave an update on planning for the Second Decade of the World's Indigenous People. Decade or not, the protection and promotion of the human rights of indigenous peoples would remain a high priority for her office. There would be a greater focus on national implementation, including follow-up activities on specific countries. It was, finally, essential for indigenous peoples to use, to their full extent, the existing human rights mechanisms.

MARK MALLOCH BROWN, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Chairman of the United Nations Development Group (UNDG), noting the different cultures and origins of participants in the Forum, expressed regret that the global economic community failed to value diversity. It was necessary to view the Millennium Goals as a key tool for redressing that dimension of the global economy. Pockets of poverty in the world that were structural and vocational in origin could only be overcome by targeted action through appropriate policies, investments and inclusion.

He expressed hope that the Millennium Project had encompassed the vision of broadening choices people had over their lives. Those included where and how to live, parental choices for their children, the expectation that children would grow to adulthood in freedom from want with job opportunities to reach their full potential. That vision of development had taken the UNDP to a rights-based approach, which was the basis for all development. People were unable to exercise choice unless they possessed the right to employment and rights for their family. That was particularly true for indigenous people, who often lived in marginal centres away from their country's economic centre.

Across the range of agency activity, the rights-based approach was now common to development projects, he said. The Forum could hold the United Nations to account regarding whether its activities were reaching the people who needed them, comparing different success rates in bringing services to the poor. Armed with that information, they could demand that governments did better in meeting their needs and fulfilling their economic, cultural and social possibilities.

JEFFREY SACHS, United Nations Millennium Project Director and Adviser to the Secretary-General, said that every community must partake in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. In addition, the specific conditions that confronted specific communities must be taken into account. He viewed the goals of the Forum and the goals of the Millennium Project as one and the same. The Millennium Goals involved basic needs to which everyone on the planet should have access. It also involved local empowerment and active participation of communities in their own future. Facing geographical challenges was a large part of the effort, as was raising the contributions of the wealthier countries.

Among specific recommendations, he proposed closer engagement between indigenous communities and the Millennium Project. He also requested action on the development of good data on indigenous people and the Goals. Raising the concept of the MillenniumVillage approach, which he called “integrated rural development” with a focus on specific conditions, he requested that participants take such projects into account.

Panel Responses to Forum Questions

To a Forum query on State disagreement to the rights-based approach to development, Ms. ARBOUR said the international community must remind them that failure to implement commitments in the Millennium Goals was a double betrayal. Not only did it represent a broken promise, but failing to alleviate poverty was also a fundamental offence to human dignity. The international community should continue to hold discussions on the need to implement commitments, persuading States that benefits were to be gained from implementing fundamental human rights ideals and goals. Equality and equity must become an integral part of progress, which should reflect more than just a minority of interests. The international community must continue to advocate that a rights-based approach was a better vision for the future development of all.

Responding to another question on poverty alleviation, Mr. SACHS noted that countries were encouraged to prepare poverty reduction strategy papers in achieving the Millennium Goals. However, those strategies had often been limited in participation, and had failed to reduce poverty because they were inadequately financed. In response, the Millennium Project had emphasized Millennium Goal-based poverty reduction strategies that were more participatory and bolder in approach. Indigenous groups should be focusing on poverty reduction strategies, ensuring that they were prepared in a participatory manner.

He added that poverty reduction strategies were meant to be implemented by communities to ensure that they had control over education and environmental management. The Millennium Project intended to promote local empowerment and focus on development. It was important for indigenous people to team up with the Millennium Project in identifying and facing developmental challenges.

Discussion

A representative of the Inter-Agency Support Group said that the IASG had noted that indigenous people were lagging behind in most social indicators, in virtually every respect. There was also concern that efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals could, in some cases, have a negative impact on indigenous and tribal peoples, while national indicators might improve.

Among the recommendations of the Support Group, she highlighted the need for the 2005 Millennium review to explicitly take into account the situation of indigenous and tribal peoples. For that purpose, sources of disaggregated data should continue to be developed. Each organization should ensure that indigenous and tribal peoples were consulted, including indigenous women and youth, in formulating, implementing and assessing its programmes for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

A representative of the International Labour Organization (ILO) said one of the main barriers to implementing the Millennium Goals, identified through ILO research, was the reluctance of governments and donors to address indigenous issues, including lack of disaggregated data that could inform operational strategies. Others included the lack of a specific focus on differentiated situations and strategies of indigenous men and women in poverty reduction efforts; the failure to capture indigenous peoples' own notions of poverty, which were often related to loss of land, language, spiritual values and traditional governance; the invisibility of indigenous economies, as well as their importance for national economies, food security and employment; the lack of understanding of issues in donor and government institutions; and weak capacity for implementing existing policies supporting indigenous people.

A representative of UN-HABITAT said that, in general, the housing conditions of indigenous people were worse than those of assimilated communities. To redress that situation, governments must create conditions for indigenous peoples to become self-reliant through control of their lands. In addition, tenure protections must be instituted, along with other kinds of assistance. Discrimination in housing must also be effectively addressed. Of course, in all housing projects for their benefit, indigenous people should be involved in the planning process.

A representative of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) described her organization's training programme for indigenous leaders, which focused on negotiation skills and conflict prevention. It was designed to increase the effectiveness in the representation of indigenous people.

A representative of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) noted that indigenous people had mainly been sidelined in the Millennium Development Goal process so far. Grave inadequacies in the Goals underpinnings must be addressed, though, if they were not to further harm indigenous people. For example, the Millennium Goals did not adequately address improving the lot of people with subsistence economies and lifestyles. Indigenous visions of well-being and economy must be taken into account, which recognize traditional skills and the continuing dynamism of indigenous peoples' ways of life. In that context, UNESCO had developed some tools to assist in creating alternative, culturally-appropriate development strategies.

A representative of the World Bank said that his institution was using the Forum as an opportunity to create partnerships for the benefit of indigenous peoples. According to a recent World Bank report, uneven progress was being made in many non-income-related Millennium Goals. To accelerate progress toward all the Goals, for all people, the Bank was stepping up its programmes in ways that complemented subsistent patterns. In education and other areas, indigenous peoples must be allowed to protect their diversity and heritage. The Bank was currently funding hundreds of projects to assist indigenous peoples in that way, in broad consultation with the people affected.

A representative of the Inter-American Development Bank said the Bank had intensified its efforts to develop norms concerning indigenous issues. It was preparing an indigenous development strategy and hoped to insert indigenous issues into bank policy. The strategy for indigenous policy was part of the institution's policies defining sustainable development in the context of the Millennium Goals. In close cooperation with United Nations agencies, it was trying to diagnose priorities and programme in achieving the Goals. One such priority was to collect disaggregated data, since the lack of such information barred many indigenous groups from being considered in achieving the Goals.

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