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PRIORITY SHOULD BE GIVEN TO PROVIDING BETTER EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES.

WITH EMPHASIS ON BILINGUAL INSTRUCTION, PERMANENT FORUM TOLD

Speakers stressed the importance of quality education in pulling indigenous people out of poverty and preserving their cultures and knowledge systems, as the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues continued its fourth session today.

Quoting a World Bank report, a senior official of that institution said education had been cited as the number one way to improve the livelihoods of indigenous peoples in Latin America. Educational level alone would not result in higher incomes, however, unless it was accompanied by a higher quality of schooling in many indigenous communities.

Priority, he said, should be placed on providing more and better education for indigenous peoples, with emphasis on implementing bilingual education programmes and providing nutritional head start programmes for children. Data collection methods should be improved to locate and identify indigenous peoples, and clear performance goals should be established to hold providers accountable.

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. It aims to draw up recommendations for the United Nations system in the areas of economic and social development, environment, health, human rights, culture and education.

A representative of Organización Indígena Aymara "Taypi Ceqe" also underscored the importance of quality primary education, describing education as the "key" to development. Moreover, since education must be in tune with development needs, emphasis must be placed on developing quality education within indigenous groups so that they could develop the skills to enter the information technologies era.

Other participants emphasized the need for indigenous educational systems to preserve the languages and knowledge systems of their peoples. A representative of the Indigenous Youth Caucus warned that indigenous peoples would be faced with assimilation into dominant societies, losing their identities and cultures, without such systems. He urged United Nations agencies to cooperate on developing curricula on indigenous cultures, and to adopt long-term policies allowing indigenous representatives to take full part in educational decision-making processes.

Similarly, a representative of the North America Caucus described indigenous languages as key resources for knowledge, and instruments for passing on traditional knowledge to indigenous children. She noted that over 70 per cent of indigenous languages were spoken by the grandparent generation in North

America. At such a rate of decline, 90 per cent of the world's languages would be lost by the end of the century. According to another participant, the representative of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, culture would die without language, while language would die without culture.

Also today, José Antonio Ocampo, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Coordinator of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, briefed the Forum on the newly inaugurated Second Decade. He said a comprehensive programme of action for the Second Decade should be drawn up, addressing key developmental concerns of indigenous peoples and focusing on indigenous participation in development processes.

He added that two themes had been proposed for the decade -- one focused on partnerships and the other on adopting a human rights approach to development centred on identity. The first priority of the Second Decade was to finalize negotiations on the draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and adopt it. He had proposed the holding of high-level dialogues to "unlock" major difficulties on the declaration, and progress with other activities for the Second Decade.

Also speaking today were the representatives of Indonesia, Guyana, and Mexico.

Speaking on behalf of indigenous organization were the representatives of the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, India; Yamassee Native Americans She-Clan; Newa Day Darbo; Asociación Nacional Indígena Salvadoreña; and the United Association of Khmer Kampuchea Krom Buddhist Monks.

In addition, representatives spoke for the Consejo Indio de Sud America; ; International Indian Treaty Council/Indigenous Environmental Network ; World Council of Churches (FAIRA); Conservation International ; Habitat Pro Association/Pueblo Kechuade Tauria, Peru; Indigenous Organizations from Chile/Corporación de Mujeres Mapuche "Aukinko Zomo"; and African Caucus.

The Forum will meet again at 10:00 a.m. on Monday, 23 May, to begin its discussion on human rights.

Background

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues met today to continue its discussion on universal primary education under the thematic approach of "language, cultural perspective and traditional knowledge". (For background information, see Press Release HR/4836 of 13 May.)

Discussion

A representative of the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, India, said prior and free consent of tribal peoples was important in making decisions that affected indigenous people. Regarding education among indigenous peoples in her country, the dropout rate ranged from 70 to 80 per cent because the teachers were not indigenous. Also, national school textbooks failed to reflect the rich contribution indigenous tribal peoples had given to India's culture. To improve the situation and counter the negative effects of globalization through education, education among indigenous peoples should emphasize: the training and appointment of indigenous teachers; education of female children; the reinforcement of cultural traditions and features; sensitizing the general population to the contributions of indigenous peoples; and empowerment of indigenous peoples so they could look after their own affairs.

Indonesia's representative said literacy was an absolute necessity in a knowledge-based global world. A healthy and educated population was a national asset. Twenty per cent of the national budget in his country went into providing education at the grass-roots level through a compulsory education programme. The long-term benefits of achieving the Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education made the cost worthwhile. Implicit in the notion of universal primary education was the

need to bring all peoples into the mainstream. Indonesia made every effort to reach all its indigenous groups. A system of decentralized community-based education management was improving educational opportunities for all. Special attention was given to remote tribal communities, and steps were being taken to protect the intellectual property rights of Indonesia's indigenous peoples.

A representative of the Yamasee Native Americans She-Clan called for the establishment of field offices to facilitate interaction and cooperation between indigenous groups and the national Government. The offices should be furnished with a database containing information on languages, cultural features and native knowledge of the peoples within the area, he said. Also, local media should report on indigenous cultural issues and in indigenous languages.

The representative of Guyana said poverty eradication was one of the principle goals of her country's development policy. A disproportionate number of indigenous people suffered from poverty, and measures were being taken to assist them within Guyana's poverty-reduction programme. The programme, however, was hampered by the country's substantial foreign debt and declining levels of trade, and the rate of poverty among indigenous groups was still unacceptably high. Efforts to assist indigenous peoples were further impeded by their dispersed settlements, difficult terrain in their territories, and the high cost of implementing poverty-reduction projects.

She stressed that education among indigenous peoples was vital in attaining individual aspirations and national development. The country already provided bilingual lessons using the five indigenous languages, and education content was being reviewed. Due to the shortage of qualified indigenous teachers, teacher-training programmes had been initiated in some regions.

A representative of the Newa Day Darbo said Nepal's promise for universal education had never been translated into practice. Private sector educational institutions had become a new sector for profit and money grabbing, creating a new gap between the haves and have-nots in the country. The Government was ignoring its prime obligation to implement an educational programme for all, according to the Second Millennium Goal. Moreover, the ongoing Maoist insurgency had badly disrupted the educational system, as students and teachers were often forced to join the insurgents.

The representative of Mexico said his Government followed a holistic approach to development, and coordinated with indigenous peoples through consultation. An Advisory Council was made up of advisors from 60 indigenous groups around the country. Educational reform would be based on the needs and idiosyncrasies of indigenous peoples, taking into account their views. Mexico had recognized indigenous links as an integral part of its national culture.

A representative of the Asociación Nacional Indígena Salvadoreña said the Government of El Salvador had failed to recognize her group as indigenous people, and several of its schools had been closed. She had come to the Forum to inform it that the people of her organization were, indeed, suffering from abuse.

HARRY ANTHONY PATRINOS, Senior Education Economist of the Human Development Department for Latin America and the Caribbean Region, the World Bank, said a report had been issued on the relation between poverty and education among the indigenous peoples of Latin America. Education was the number one way to improve the poverty level, but improving the education level among indigenous people had not translated into improvements in income. That was found to be a result of the poor quality of schooling among indigenous people.

To improve the situation, he said the priority should be placed on providing more and better education for indigenous peoples. Emphasis should also be placed on implementing bilingual education programmes already developed and on providing head start programmes for children to make sure they were healthy to learn. Data collection methods should be improved to identify indigenous peoples, and

clear performance goals should be set to hold providers accountable. Finally, local groups must be given responsibility for implementing measures, and parents must be brought into the process.

A representative of Organización Indígena Aymara “Taypi Ceqe” of Bolivia said education was the key to development for all countries. Quality primary universal education was a prerequisite. The literacy rate among indigenous peoples in his country had been raised through educational reforms, such as bilingual education programmes. However, since education must be in tune with development needs, the emphasis must now be placed on developing the leadership and quality control within indigenous groups to enable them to enter into the information technologies era. That meant promoting a multicultural, multisectoral approach that promoted the rights of all peoples.

A representative of United Association of Khmer Kampuchea Krom Buddhist Monks called on the Government of Viet Nam to stop its persecution of his group. He said the Government’s treatment of his people was inhumane, depriving them not only of cultural rights but of basic freedoms. They were denied access to social services and higher education. The temple had been turned into a military camp. The statement was an appeal to the United Nations system and to the world community to intervene on the group’s behalf.

A representative of the Consejo Indio de Sud America said his people must take control of their educational system from the Canadian Government. The right to self-determination was critical to indigenous people, and education, and traditional knowledge and wisdom -- regarding the relationship with Mother Earth -- must be taught in traditional ways. Until educational institutions understood that, State education would continue to be irrelevant to indigenous peoples. It was a fundamental right that all people should be allowed to teach their children within their own knowledge systems, free from State interference.

A representative of the Indigenous Youth Caucus stressed the need for indigenous educational systems to preserve the languages and knowledge systems of their peoples. Without such systems, indigenous peoples would be faced with assimilation into the dominant society, losing their identities and cultures. He recommended that United Nations agencies cooperate to develop curricula on indigenous cultures, and adopt long-term policies allowing indigenous representatives to take full part in decision-making processes. Moreover, Government should adopt educational programmes pertaining to indigenous history, with attention paid to treaties.

A representative of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People said language was the expression of cultural identity. Without language, culture would die, and without culture, language would die. The educational policies of previous colonizers were based on domestication and assimilation. Nigeria’s national language policy considered it to be in the interest of indigenous peoples to learn one of the three mainstream languages. He recommended that Government promote bilingual education for indigenous peoples.

A representative of the North American Caucus stressed the importance of indigenous languages in achieving the Millennium Goal of universal primary education. Languages were key resources of knowledge, and instrumental in passing on traditional knowledge to indigenous children. In North America, over 70 per cent of indigenous languages were spoken by the grandparent generation. At the present rate of decline, 90 per cent of the world’s languages would be lost by the end of the century. The Forum should support declaration of a United Nations international year for languages in 2007; further funding from States and agencies for language revitalization programmes; and the establishment of an international fund for language work.

JOSÉ ANTONIO OCAMPO, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Coordinator of the Second Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, briefed the Forum on the newly inaugurated Second Decade. He called propitious the fact that the Second Decade was beginning in a year of stocktaking for Member States and the United Nations system. The coinciding of 2015 as the end for the Decade and as the target date for achieving the Millennium Development Goals was also significant.

He said a comprehensive Programme of Action for the Second Decade should be drawn up. It should address the key concerns of indigenous peoples in the area of development and should focus on the integration of the indigenous perspective into development plans and the participation of indigenous peoples in development processes. It should also account for the development of specific indicators and methods for collecting disaggregated data beyond national aggregates.

Two themes had been proposed for the Decade, he continued. One was the concept of partnership and the other the adoption of a human rights approach to development centred on the concept of identity. Key objectives and activities could centre on: standard-setting, monitoring and strategic implementation at the international and regional levels; strengthening of work at the national level; and capacity-building.

The first priority of the Second Decade, he went on, was to finalize negotiations on the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and to adopt it early in the Decade. The Programme of Action could incorporate the Forum's work in its mandated areas, and the Forum could monitor Second Decade activities. Focal points at the country level could be designated among United Nations bodies already established. They could follow up implementation of the Forum's recommendations and the Decade's objectives, with governments promoting national focal points. Finally, technical resources could be provided so that national information systems could carry out the task of systemizing data collection and processing.

Questions and Answers

Forum members asked José Antonio Ocampo, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, how the Second Decade for Indigenous People could be translated into reality, and when the declaration on the rights of indigenous people would be finished and adopted at the country level. One member stressed the importance of raising political awareness of the declaration so that indigenous viewpoints could be known and accepted.

Members also pointed out that governments during the first Decade for Indigenous Peoples had not really attempted to implement its recommendations, stressing that resources should be made available to indigenous people for that purpose.

They also stressed the need to instruct United Nations agencies to assist indigenous peoples in overcoming specific problems, and to instruct Member States about activities to be carried out over the Second Decade. Several also questioned Mr. Ocampo on the availability of disaggregated data on indigenous peoples.

Responding, Mr. OCAMPO said he hoped a decision on the declaration would be made early in the Second Decade. He had proposed the holding of high-level dialogues to "unlock" major difficulties and advance other activities for the Second Decade.

He said it was also vital to raise awareness about the Decade's goals to mobilize strong political commitment around them. In order to make progress, Decade programmes should be carried out through a tripartite arrangement, which brought together governments, indigenous peoples and United Nations staff in each country. The United Nations could support Decade activities, but joint efforts with indigenous peoples would be needed to bring them about. Standard-setting efforts would legitimize programmes, ensuring that they took on a high profile in each country.

Regarding disaggregated data, he said he expected to have more ready soon.

A representative of the International Indian Treaty Council/Indigenous Environmental Network said her group was involved with the environmental concerns of indigenous and traditional peoples. That included situations where mercury poisoning resulted from actions by extractive industries and caused not

only environmental harm that impacted negatively on the economy, but also severe learning and behavioural disabilities in the population. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) should expand its umbrella of protections to reverse the development of such situations. A legally binding instrument should ban the creation of such hazards. Agencies must make funds available for affected indigenous peoples to hire their own environmental analysts.

A delegate of the World Council of Churches (FAIRA) said indigenous languages were on the verge of dying out, as they were in Australia. The Council had represented indigenous people's issues since the 1980s, but it had not yet addressed the question of the language that was an integral part of the right to identity and self-determination. The Forum should designate 2006 as the international year of indigenous languages. All governments should recognize the right of indigenous peoples to their language, and all States with indigenous populations should take steps to affirm the global need to protect global lingual diversity.

A spokesperson for Conservation International said the goal of her organization was to ensure that the earth's natural heritage was protected in areas known as "hot spots". Those were endangered sites based on the premise that indigenous traditional peoples relied on healthy ecosystems for their livelihoods and for passing down traditional knowledge. National governments often did not recognize indigenous people's rights and allowed situations to occur such as environmental degradation or loss of water access. The condition must be addressed under the framework of the Millennium Development Goals by building partnerships between traditional peoples, governments and conservation groups. A broader dialogue must be built both to protect the earth's biodiversity and indigenous peoples' rights. The Forum should advise governments on the need to respect those rights and should promote the dialogue. It should develop a programme of action on the issue and should facilitate the transfer of information.

A speaker for Habitat Pro Association/Pueblo Kechuade Tauria, Peru, said native languages such as Kechua were in danger of dying out. That must not be allowed to happen because the cultural identity was also in danger. Language was not just a way of communicating, but a way of thinking about the world. The Kechua-formulated concepts carried dimensions the Spanish language did not. Peru's Government saw bilingual education as a purely economic matter, but the indigenous peoples must be entrusted and empowered to educate their children and pass down their knowledge to future generations. The Government needed to train bilingual teachers as a priority.

A representative of Indigenous Organizations from Chile/Corporación de Mujeres Mapuche "Aukinko Zomo" said the situation of indigenous peoples in the country had not changed despite repeated calls from United Nations entities, such

as the Special Rapporteur, for the Government to improve its approach. The Government would not promote bilingual education, and it would not take steps to ensure that rights to cultural identity were respected. Language was fundamental to education among indigenous people. Since the Government would not respect the right to exercise language and thereby facilitate education, indigenous peoples in Chile should be given their own territory. The achievement of the Millennium Development Goals should be the basis on which the Forum got governments to make changes.

A speaker for the African Caucus said there was no national policy to promote education for either adults or children among the indigenous groups in the Caucus. In fact, the entire educational environment was handicapped by conditions such as dilapidated buildings, underpaid teachers and lack of textbooks. Recommendations included the involvement of indigenous parents in the education of their children according to their culture and lifestyle. In the case of nomadic peoples, for example, mobile schools needed to be provided. Elders must also be involved in planning the educational curriculum. More effort must be made to fund programmes that promoted education reform, including in related areas such as improving health and living conditions. Emphasis should be equally placed on building capacity and promoting respect for culture.