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Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

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Data Collection and the disaggregation of data on indigenous peoples

Statement by the Hon Warren Snowdon MP Member for Lingiari

(Check against delivery)

Mr/Madam Chair, Members of the Permanent Forum, Distinguished Delegates,

The collection of reliable data is one of the fundamental tools for advancing the interests of the world's Indigenous peoples. Fundamentally, it allows better judgements to be made about the effectiveness of policies and programs that have a direct impact on the quality of life experienced by Indigenous peoples.

We would like to take this opportunity to make some general observations about Indigenous data collection and to bring to the Forum's attention a particular initiative that we have piloted in Australia.

There are many challenges and issues that are faced by all countries attempting to improve Indigenous data collection, but Australia would like to highlight two issues in particular.

Firstly, there is a need for standardised data so that it can be comparable over time, across communities and between related issues. Secondly, we need to make the data relevant to Indigenous people's needs by presenting it in a useful format.

Standardization of Data

Mr/Madam Chair, a key component of standardizing data is the need for a consistent Indigenous “identifier” to be used across all data collection areas. Of course the nature of that identifier is fundamentally a domestic issue for each country. There can be no international standard, because Indigenous peoples across the world have differing ways of defining group membership – in some places it depends on degrees of ancestry whereas in places like Australia we make no such distinctions.

In Australia, in most administrative data systems and government data collections where an Indigenous identification question is asked, it is solely a matter for an individual to choose to identify himself or herself as Indigenous, assuming they have some degree of Indigenous ancestry. (If, however, they wish to take advantage of an Indigenous-specific government program and there is any question as to their Indigenous identity, they can be required to demonstrate that they are accepted as an Indigenous person by the community in which they live.)

Reliance on self-identification as an identifier can also give rise to sensitivities. For example an Indigenous identification question in a survey or questionnaire can be seen as intrusive, irrelevant, threatening or inappropriate. This may be the case in a criminal justice environment or child welfare services, where the history of contact by Indigenous people may have led to a distrust of the agencies involved in delivering the relevant services.

Recent work in Australia to document and improve Indigenous identification is initially focusing on key administrative collections such as the statistics collected in the registration of births and deaths, criminal justice statistics, hospitals data and education data.

The adoption of a standard question for Indigenous status is a way to improve the standardisation of data. It provides consistency over time and over data collections and allows valid ratio and rate statistics to be produced. We are doing this in Australia by promoting the standard question 'are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?' and allowing for the response to be yes to either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or both.

Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report

The second issue we would like to raise is the effective use of such data. I would therefore like to take a few moments to describe a major initiative in this area recently taken by Australia.

What we have done is to develop and publish a regular report which documents Indigenous socio-economic status within a framework that has both a vision of what the future should be for Indigenous people **and** a strategic focus on key areas that need to be targeted in the meantime if that longer term vision is to be realised. The broad details of this report, called 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage', are worth sharing in this international forum in the hope that they will be helpful to other countries in their management of data development on Indigenous populations.

This particular report differs from past statistical reports in that it is not just a compendium of data. The report aims to direct attention toward the root causes of Indigenous disadvantage and to systematically monitor the outcomes to ensure the complete transparency of government's performance.

The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report sets out a number of what we call headline indicators ie. indicators that have been highlighted as a priority, such as:

- life expectancy at birth;
- high school retention and completion rates;

- labour force participation and unemployment;
- home ownership;
- child neglect or abuse;
- victim rates for crime; and
- imprisonment and juvenile detention rates.

The report assumes that these headline indicators of disadvantage represent the culmination of many years or even a lifetime of disadvantage. As a consequence, they will measure longer term responsiveness to changes in policy settings and service delivery practices. Though these headline indicators continue to be measured to provide a picture of Indigenous disadvantage, the report also frames a set of indicators around seven strategic change areas where interventions may have a more immediate impact.

For example, a focus on improving outcomes in the strategic change area of 'early child development' has the potential to improve such longer term headline indicators as high school completion rates and ultimately unemployment rates.

The first version of the report, produced in 2003, provided a baseline for future reporting which will tell us where things are going well, where things appear stalled and where it is best to focus investment in order to make a difference. The next report is due for release next month. Like all such data we regard it as a fundamental device for measuring and improving the performance of government programs, and for holding governments accountable to their Indigenous peoples.