

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

THE DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL

REMARKS TO THE OPENING OF THE EIGHTH SESSION OF THE UNITED
NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES

New York, 18 May 2009

Distinguished Members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues,
Distinguished representatives of Indigenous Peoples' Organizations
Distinguished Elders,
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this Eighth Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Many of you have traveled very far to be here today. I thank you for taking the time. I am confident that these two weeks will make the long trip worthwhile.

This meeting comes at a crucial time. The world is coping with a swarm of crises. Hunger, poverty, global warming and security threats are intensifying. All are especially devastating to indigenous communities.

But indigenous peoples have a record of resilience in the face of struggle. This Permanent Forum is the result of a decades-long effort to put indigenous concerns on the international agenda.

That drive culminated in 2007 with the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We now have a Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, and an Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the Human rights Council.

The Special Rapporteur is making heard the voices of the indigenous victims and survivors of human rights violations. And thanks to the Special Rapporteur's work, more Governments have been engaged in a dialogue promoting the improvement of indigenous peoples' lives.

The United Nations system itself is increasing efforts to become more engaged on indigenous issues.

United Nations agencies and other inter-governmental organizations have adopted policies and guidelines on indigenous issues. And I welcome the interaction of these agencies with this Permanent Forum.

A number of UN bodies are doing more to improve not only their policies, but also their action on the ground on indigenous issues. I look forward to seeing the vision of a ONE UN become a reality in this work.

Indeed, indigenous peoples have used their voice to make a great impact on our work. Just last month, they contributed to the United Nations Forum on Forests and the Commission on Sustainable Development.

Individual countries are also moving forward and have taken the welcome step of endorsing the Declaration. I call on those countries that have not yet done so to follow suit.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are all important achievements, but you know better than anyone that they are not enough. Indigenous peoples around the world continue to suffer from prejudice and marginalization. Indigenous women are subject to many forms of discrimination and are brutalized by violence. Powerful forces continue to take land from indigenous peoples, denigrate their cultures, suppress their languages and even directly attack their very lives.

These acts violate every principle enshrined in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. They are an offence not only to indigenous peoples but to the conscience of humanity.

The General Assembly solemnly proclaimed that the Declaration is “a standard of achievement to be pursued in a spirit of partnership and mutual respect”.

We must live up to these words. We have to do more than just raise living standards for indigenous peoples; we must listen to their voices, heed their warnings and seek their contributions to achieving our shared objectives.

Indigenous peoples have been living the principle of sustainable development since long before it became an international buzzword. But too often, their wisdom and traditional knowledge are overlooked or – worse – stolen. The very peoples who have the utmost respect for biodiversity have been excluded from decisions on how to protect the natural world.

This must change. Protecting indigenous communities and their wealth of wisdom will not only enhance their lives – it will serve the interests of all people concerned about a healthy future for our planet. We ignore indigenous peoples at our peril. But if we listen to them, society as a whole will benefit.

This means bringing indigenous peoples' contributions to the table in international negotiations on the main challenges facing our world. We must make sure that the concerns and ideas of indigenous peoples are high on its agenda.

The same is true of the intensive negotiations leading up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen this December. Indigenous peoples have direct experience of the impacts of climate change, and they have expressed that knowledge in their recently adopted Alaska Declaration.

Friends,

Looking out across this room, I see a beautiful tapestry of diversity stitched together with a common purpose: protecting our planet and its most vulnerable cultures and peoples.

By uniting your different strengths to reach common goals, you can help address the many threats facing humanity, for the sake of present and future generations.

I salute you, and I urge you to continue your activism and your engagement – not only at this Forum but across the international stage so the entire global community can benefit from your ideas and your solutions.

Thank you.

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