

20/05/05, # 3CB, 144



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Statement on
Education and Indigenous Peoples in Latin America

Statement by

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Economic and Social Council
Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Fourth Session
May 20, 2005

Madam Chair, Members of the Permanent Forum and Distinguished Delegates:

I am honored to bring before you today the World Bank's contribution to your reflections on Millennium Development Goal 2, achievement of universal primary education, and its implications for Indigenous Peoples. As the prime example of this work, I am honored today to present to you highlights of a recently released World Bank study that examines how income, education, health and other human development indicators for Indigenous and non-indigenous peoples evolved in Latin America over the course of the decade 1994-2004.

The World Bank believes that education creates choices and opportunities for people, reduces the twin burdens of poverty and diseases, and gives a stronger voice in society. Investing in high quality education is among the most powerful measures known to reduce poverty and inequality and to promote long-term economic growth. But it is clear that the benefits of education do not accrue equally to all inhabitants in countries around the world.

Indigenous Peoples have historically been the most disadvantaged, marginalized, and excluded populations in many parts of the world. Their identities, cultures, lands, and resources are uniquely intertwined and especially vulnerable. The World Bank's relationship with Indigenous Peoples in the twenty-first century has moved beyond its modest 'do no harm' objective of its earliest policies of a generation ago to a more proactive approach that promotes Indigenous Peoples' participation in development, benefit sharing, and the provision of culturally sensitive benefits.

Indigenous peoples represent 10 percent of Latin America's total population, representing a diverse group of cultures, traditions and languages. The study updates a 1994 report and focuses on the five countries in the region with the largest Indigenous populations – Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru.

Our main finding is that income poverty rates changed little for Indigenous Peoples over the course of the decade. Even in those countries where poverty declined, it did so more slowly – or not all – for Indigenous Peoples. In countries hit by economic crises, Indigenous Peoples recovered more slowly.

Yet some education indicators have improved. Most notably, the gap between Indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in enrollment and in years of schooling has decreased. Guatemala registers the lowest absolute levels of education for Indigenous Peoples, averaging just 2.5 years of schooling at the close of the decade, while Peru registers the highest at 6.4 years. But in all countries the schooling gap continued to shrink over the 1990s, following trends established in earlier decades.

How is it that education rates have improved, but incomes have not? We think the main reason is the quality of education that Indigenous children receive, as reflected in higher dropout, repetition and failure rates and significantly lower scores in reading and math tests. This means that at the same grade level, as a result of the poor quality schooling received Indigenous students are learning only a fraction of what non-indigenous students

learn. There is also evidence of employment discrimination, a second factor that may explain limited gains in income poverty reduction despite increasing years of education.

Madam Chair:

Our report makes four major recommendations. First, a focus on more and better education for the region's Indigenous Peoples, which entails narrowing the gap in years of schooling while at the same time improving the quality of education, including incentives for parental participation, and improved secondary school access. One often cited solution for improving Indigenous Peoples education is increased use of bilingual education. The use of bilingual education has expanded, but it continues to be poorly implemented in many parts of the region. Our evidence shows that when properly implemented, these programs can significantly reduce learning gaps and generate cost savings, which can be used to expand Indigenous education programs.

Second, we recommend a head start for Indigenous children. This is important given the linkages between health and education. Thus, it is essential to narrow the major gaps in health care access and outcomes between Indigenous and non-indigenous children. A head start type of program would provide early childhood development and maternal health benefits for Indigenous Peoples.

Third, we emphasize the importance of improved data collection related to identifying Indigenous populations. More standardized and consistent data collection will allow for better policy design, implementation, and results monitoring.

Finally, we recommend setting clear performance goals that can be used to hold providers accountable. This will help improve accountability in the delivery of social services for Indigenous Peoples. By this we mean giving local Indigenous groups greater voice and responsibility in the implementation of social programs. And we mean involving parents and the community more. This is particularly important for Indigenous schools, for which decisions regarding curricula are made at the national level with little local accountability.

Madam Chair:

All of this, we believe, will be extremely helpful for monitoring what we hope will be greater progress in the future towards achieving the hopes and dreams of Indigenous Peoples, not only in Latin America, but worldwide.

Thank you.