

OPENING STATEMENT

Before the Working Group on Indigenous Populations

by Prof. Dr. ERICA-IRENE A. D A E S

Chairperson/Rapporteur of the WGIP

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Distinguished Representative of the Secretary General,
Distinguished Chiefs, and Representatives of the Indigenous
nations and peoples, and of the observer Governments,
Distinguished representatives of the specialized agencies, Dear
Colleagues, my fellow members of the Working Group,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to welcome all of you to
the twelfth session of the United Nations Working Group on
Indigenous Populations. I would like in particular to welcome
warmly the new member of the Working Group Mr. Said Naceur
Ramadhane from Tunisia , who has replaced Ambassador Judith Sefi
Attah from Nigeria. I take this opportunity to pay tribute and
to express grateful thanks to Ambassador Attah for her valuable
contribution to the work of our Working Group.

Let me also welcome the 43 indigenous representatives
who are being assisted by the Voluntary Fund for Indigenous
Populations.

I wish to express my warmest thanks to my dear

Colleagues and friends for electing me once again as Chairperson/
Rapporteur of this important Working Group. I am grateful for the
kind words of my distinguished colleagues professors Miguel
Alfonso Martinez and Ribot Hatano
in proposing my candidature.

Dear Participants,

It is with a deep sense of respect and responsibility
that I take up the chair of this Working Group once again, as we
begin its twelfth session.

Together, we have achieved a great deal -far more than
any of us could have predicted in 1984 when I first had the
honour to sit before you here as Chairperson/Rapporteur.

We have celebrated an International Year of the World's
Indigenous People, which was originally proposed in this Working
Group, and was planned and implemented with the free and full
participation of all of us. In this respect I would like to
mention in particular the new book published by the United
Nations Department of Public Information, entitled "Seeds
of a New Partnership - Indigenous Peoples and the
United Nations", which contains basically the voices of the
indigenous peoples. As the ^{United Nations} Secretary General writes in the
prologue of this book I quote: The voices in this book tell us of
peoples whose way of life is under threat. They tell of peoples
who have lived through centuries of racism., domination and human
rights violations, whose values and culture have been under
attack. But the voices of this book also tell of hope. They tell

[Butros
Butros
Ghali]

of the will to live and of the desire to find a new basis for relating to the world. These are indeed seeds of a new partnership . In these seeds, we shall find the power of growth." end of quotation.

We placed indigenous peoples' concerns on the agenda of the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, and achieved international consensus on the need to respect indigenous peoples' values, territories, traditional knowledge and subsistence rights.

We included indigenous peoples' wishes on the agenda of the World Conference on Human Rights at Vienna last year and won recommendations for extending the International Year into a Decade, and establishing a permanent forum for indigenous peoples within the United Nations system, - both of which have now been endorsed by the General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights.


We have completed the drafting of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which I am hopeful will be approved by our parent bodies, and become the fundamental instrument and guide of policy and practice in the field of the recognition and protection of the rights of the worlds' indigenous peoples .

We have indeed come to an important new stage in our work. We are ready now to shift our attention somewhat from standard setting, to i m p l e m e n t a t i o n. Our role will now become more operational. Largely , as a result of our work, the United Nations is finally ready to begin extending its hand

directly to indigenous communities in a partnership for development and social change. Working together, in the next five days, we will begin to work out the details of that partnership.

In my capacity as Chairperson/Rapporteur, I want to stress to you today the fact that we have accomplished all of this together, in a spirit of respect and co-operation which is absolutely unique in the practice of the United Nations system. Our work sets the stage for what we hope will become the future relationship between indigenous peoples, nation-States and international organizations. Whatever else we may have accomplished, we have demonstrated that indigenous peoples, governments, independent experts and United Nations officials can work together constructively, learn from one another and begin to trust one another. Even more than our formal recommendations, the example we have set, by our respect for one another in the many years we have worked together, will continue to inspire the relationships among our nations.

Together, we have become more than a working group; over these years, we have become a community. We have learned to work together in a liberal and constructive spirit of cooperation and to miss our friendships and the inspiration and stimulation of our individual and cultural diversity during the months between our annual meetings.

As a community, we share the heavy burden of 

responsibility that goes along with the privilege of enjoying these few days together. I am speaking of the responsibility to continue to set a clear example of mutual respect, commitment to principle, and hard and constructive work for the people who look to us leadership.

We must never allow our community to be divided by personal misunderstandings or filibusters. We must help each other continue to deserve the respect and credibility of our respective nations and the international community. Above all, we must never forget why we are here, why we have built this community in Geneva over the past 13 years, and to demonstrate that we are a community of a c t i o n. We have to prove that we have dedicated ourselves, individually, to the survival and improvement of indigenous peoples lives, everywhere.

In this spirit, I appeal to all of you, as fellows of this community, to use our time this week profitably. In my opinion we are a community already committed to u r g e n y a n d / t o a c t i o n. It is imperative that we use every minute that is available to us this week, to make concrete proposals for action by the higher bodies of the United Nations.

We have strived together for many years, to persuade the competent organs and bodies of the United Nations and its specialized agencies to come to the Working Group to listen in particular to the indigenous peoples for guidance whenever the rights and interests of indigenous peoples are at stake.

We have succeeded. Let us not abandon this historic victory, by failing to give to the General Assembly and other United Nations competent organs and bodies the guidance they seek.

Distinguished Participants,

In the days ahead, then, let us all try to focus our attention on those issues where our advice has been specifically requested by other United Nations organs and bodies, and strive to be as concise, concrete, specific and constructive as possible in our proposals and statements.

We are, of course, also working under some constraints. The five additional days of meeting time which we had enjoyed for several years, are not available to us at this session. However, I am confident that our successful use of this year's session to provide concrete guidance and specific recommendations on the issues placed before us by the General Assembly, will persuade the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and the Commission on Human Rights to ensure that we have adequate meeting time in the future.

Distinguished participants,

I would now like to review with you, briefly, the main topics of the provisional agenda for this week, as I see them.

I believe that the most urgent and complex task before us will be responding to the General Assembly's request for proposals and recommendations concerning the proclamation of the

I n t e r n a t i o n a l D e c a d e o f t h e W o r l d ' s I n d i g e n o u s P e o p l e, which falls under item 7 of our draft provisional agenda. It is important to ensure that the Decade is more thoroughly planned than the International Year and has a more direct, positive and lasting impact. Permit me also to draw your attention to two rather pressing questions: the format for the inaugural ceremonies for the Decade on December 10, 1994 and the choice of an appropriate date for the annual celebration of an I n t e r n a t i o n a l D a y o f t h e W o r l d ' s I n d i g e n o u s P e o p l e. We cannot fail to make specific recommendations on these points, in our report of the week's session, since the preparatory work of the Decade will begin in just over four months' time.

Also a high priority, I believe, will be our consideration of the possible structure, membership, and mandate of a p e r m a n e n t U n i t e d N a t i o n s f o r u m for indigenous peoples and the way this may affect the future role of the Working Group. The Sub-Commission will consider our recommendations and I hope it will submit them to the Commission on Human Rights for its consideration during its session in 1995. I hope that the Commission on Human Rights through the Economic and Social Council will transmit its recommendation to the 50th session of the General Assembly. Thus we must take this opportunity to press our views in as much detail and with as strong a consensus as possible. I have sketched some options for the

permanent forum in document E/CN.4/Sub.2/Ac.4/13 , which I request you to consider with all the other relevant document before you, as a possible starting-point for our discussions during this week. The original proposal for a permanent forum was made by the Sami peoples some years ago and was reaffirmed by indigenous peoples, both at the Earth Summit and the Vienna Conference on Human Rights and in my view, the endorsement of this proposal by the General Assembly marks a significant step in the evolving legal status of indigenous peoples in the United Nations system. I have made it clear in my note that this n e w United Nations body should be genuinely representative of Indigenous Peoples themselves, just as I strongly believe that this Working Group should begin to include indigenous representation. I hope that our recommendations on this subject stress democratic, geographically - balanced representation and the highest aciev-able level of direct indigenous access to United Nations decisionsmakers.

You will also have before you the third and final report on the impacts of transnational corporations on indigenous peoples' lands, document E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.4/40), and may wish to give us briefly for future United Nations action based on that important report.

Further, with respect to item 1 of the provisional agenda, we have no additional work to do here on the t e x t

of the draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which is now before the Sub-Commission to be reviewed and transmitted in turn to the Commission on Human Rights. However, it is my opinion that we should take some time, the soonest possible, to discuss ways of ensuring the maximum possible indigenous' active participation in the consideration of the draft declaration by higher United Nations organs and bodies, in particular by the Commission on Human Rights

Distinguished Participants,

Our work together within the United Nations system must continue vigorously over the next twelve months. Besides of the important meetings of the Sub-Commission, Commission on Human Rights and General Assembly that will take appropriate action on the Decade, the Permanent Forum, and the draft United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Rights, there will be a number of other momentous international meetings in the months ahead that we may usefully begin thinking of the indigenous peoples active participation. Permit me to alert you in particular to the International Conference on Population and Development, to be conveyed at Cairoon September 5-13, 1994. Due to the efforts of a number of indigenous peoples and some of us, the draft final document of the Conference contains a subchapter VI(D) on "indigenous people" that builds further on the relevant

conclusions on the Earth Summit.

I should also like to remind all of the participants of the World Summit for Social Development, to be held at Copenhagen on March 6-10 1995. The Preparatory Committee will meet to draft recommendations at New York from August 22 to September 2, 1994 and again for the last time on January 16-27, 1995. Indigenous peoples have not yet, intervened, as far as I know, in the preparations for this significant United Nations Conference, and may lose the opportunity to see that it adopts any specific recommendations on indigenous peoples within the framework of social development.

Dear Participants,

As a humble Chairperson/Rapporteur of this Working Group I will do everything in my power to see that we accomplish the very difficult and complex work before us. But I must appeal not only to your patience, in what will be an exhausting and demanding five days, but also rely upon your continued confidence in my commitment to see that indigenous peoples's views and aspirations are respected and that justice is done. It takes a great deal of pressure to create change in an institution as vast and complicated as the United Nations, and it takes a constant supply of new initiatives to maintain that pressure.

We must be modern in our thinking, consistent in our

our collective efforts and keep our shared concerns in perpetual motion .

Thank you very much for your kind attention,

Prof. Dr. ERICA-IRENE A. D A E S