

*Thank you madame chair and members
for allowing me to speak.*

PF/theresa 332

Tenth Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous
Issues (UNPFII)

Agenda Item 6, Comprehensive Dialogue with United Nations Agencies
and Funds: Comprehensive Dialogue with the United Nations Children's
Fund

**“Development” and the Connection with Historical Trauma and
Current Health Disparities for Indigenous Peoples**

Delivered by

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Hau, Mitakuyapi, my name is Theresa Burns, and I am a member of the Oglala Lakota and Northern Cheyenne Nations. I am descended from the Oglala leader, Red Cloud, and I am the daughter of seven generations of Lakota women who have taught me to believe in, and defend, my people.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is currently unable to extend its services to the Indigenous youth in the contemporary boundaries of the United States, because the UN system generalizes the territories of many Indigenous Nations as part of the US, i.e. as parts of a developed country. The conventional view of development from the Western paradigm is that “development” is assumed to be positive, unavoidable and an essential part interwoven with the separation of humans from other aspects of the natural environment. Indigenous Peoples offer a distinctly different view of development from our historical perspective. For me as a Lakota woman, “development” has often meant the destruction of our territories—especially through operations of extractive industries (gold, uranium and coal mining). It has also meant the obliteration of our culture and language through the taking of our children and their indoctrination in government or religious

paid the ultimate price for the imposition of western "development," resulting in Indigenous youth despair.

Sisters and brothers, and members of the Permanent Forum, I implore you not to allow the ways in which development is destroying our people, and especially our youth, to be ignored by policies and procedures, or to be relegated simply to items on an agenda. Our children are dying—I mean really dying—being killed, being murdered, committing suicide, and abandoning their families, culture and identity because western modes of development demand it.

Brothers and sisters, UNICEF should not overlook the fact that Indigenous youth suffer from substantially high rates of suicide simply because of political, economic, and social colonialism; this course of action means that the right to life—the right to live with hope, without fear, without having to reject traditional values and spirituality—is stripped from the Indigenous youth of Nations that are denied their territorial right to self-determination within developed countries. Self-determination and development mean nothing if our children are dead, or if they remain alive as mere shadows of their ancestors. Toward this end, I extend the following recommendations to the Tenth Session of the Permanent Forum:

1. I call on the Special Rapportuer on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to engage in a specific investigation on the condition of Indigenous youth suicides and deaths at the hands of police forces of the colonial system in the United States. Furthermore, I call on UNICEF to stop ignoring the special status of Indigenous peoples within colonial boundaries of developed countries.
2. I call on the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to investigate, report, and submit recommendations

schools—with the deliberate intent to “civilize” and “educate” them in a competitive, individualistic and Christian/European mode. Finally, “development” has often meant that we, as Indigenous peoples, must adopt the western view that the natural environment, including human labor, is a commodity, to be exploited with disrespect for our Indigenous spiritual and cultural traditions.

Article 22 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) states that “Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs” of Indigenous peoples, including youth and children in the context of implementation of the Declaration; moreover, Article 22 continues by recommending that “States shall take measures, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, to ensure that indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination.”

The consequences of the imposition of the unsustainable, western development model on Indigenous Peoples have been widespread and profound. My intervention will focus on one particular aspect; that is, the adverse impacts of this development model on the physical and mental health of Indigenous youth.

American Indians in the United States and the Lakota in particular, experience the worst health conditions of any people in the United States. Indigenous women and children in the United States suffer the worst rates of sexual violence of any group, and 86 percent of the perpetrators of the violence are non-Native men.¹ American Indians experience the worst infant mortality, the worst incidence of avoidable diseases like diabetes, heart disease, substance addiction, and worst of all—a youth suicide rate that is higher than any other group. Indigenous health conditions are not the result of happenstance, or of the natural predisposition of Native peoples. As the 2009 UN study on the State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples asserts, “Youth suicide in Indigenous communities takes place in the context of contemporary discrimination and marginalization and historical trauma related to colonization,

assimilations and the loss of traditional livelihoods. The suicide rate for American Indian and Alaska Native youth aged 15 to 24 is [300 percent] higher than the national average” in the US.ⁱⁱ

These horrible conditions are the direct result of deliberate policies of the United States, religious denominations, corporations and private individuals that have stolen our territories, contaminated our lands, destroyed our languages and familial structures, and supplanted our traditional mechanisms for governance, food production, dispute resolution and economic self-sufficiency. Our people have been driven, often by economic despair and deliberate government policies, from their traditional territories, into impoverished urban environments. Today, nearly 70 percent of American Indians in the United States live in urban areas, far from their homelands, and far from any opportunity to embrace simultaneously their traditional identities and their right to development and self-determination.

My relatives, you have heard time and again the record of genocide, ethnocide and ecocide against my people. I am not going to recount the details of those crimes here today. Instead, I am going to tell you that these issues are not hypothetical, they are not theoretical, they are not abstract, they are not merely statistics; they are real and they affect our lives every day. Our children are dying, being killed, and are more and more frequently making the desperate and tragic decision to leave this life at their own hand.

As do many Indigenous mothers, I know the pain and sorrow of these events personally. My own son could no longer withstand the social, political and economic forces around him that would seek to squeeze the last essence of Indigenous identity out of him. His territory had been stolen, the Treaties with his Nation had been consistently violated, his ability to sustain himself economically had been destroyed, and the expectation that he would abandon his Indigenous identity was made to him daily and unambiguously by the invader society around him. He

addressing the health disparities of Indigenous peoples around the world.

3. I call on the Permanent Forum to advance recommendations to the General Assembly and other specialized agencies of the United Nations to move States toward implementing the recommendations of the 2009 *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples* report to recognize the health crises that face Indigenous Peoples, to take responsibility for their role in the creation and continuation of those conditions, to respect and support Indigenous health systems and to promote the establishment and operation of intercultural health systems in Indigenous communities, both urban and rural—especially to address the epidemic of youth suicides and violence against Indigenous children.

Pilamiyapelo. (I thank you)

Mitakuye Oyasin. (For all our relations)

ⁱ Amnesty International. *Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the United States*, 2007. P.4.

ⁱⁱ Alaska Injury Prevention Center. Critical Illness and Trauma Foundation and American Society of Suicidology (2006), p.12.