

**Statement by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights
to the Fourth Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**

Agenda Item 3b

Statement by : Ms. MALÛNA ABELSON

Madame Chairperson,
Distinguished Members of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Under agenda item 3A, the PF has been discussing the first Millennium Development Goal: the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, which is indeed linked to the second Millennium Development Goal: the achievement of universal primary education for all boys and girls, because as long as indigenous children and youth do not obtain education they are likely to continue belonging to the most deprived groups in society. The two goals should therefore be considered as closely linked.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights would like to draw attention to the work of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people whose report this year to the Commission on Human Rights focused on "Indigenous Peoples and education". The report also makes reference to the findings of an expert seminar on Indigenous Peoples and Education, which took place in Paris in October 2004 organized by OHCHR and UNESCO. The Special Rapporteur, Mr. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, will himself address the Forum on Monday 23 May under agenda item 4 "Human rights" and will no doubt make reference to his conclusions and recommendations contained in his report.

Considerable evidence has been produced through the various human rights mechanisms of the UN that affirm that the level of education of indigenous peoples in general is significantly lower than that of the non-indigenous population. Of the multitude of explanations for this difference, the Office would like to highlight two areas that could be the subject of especial consideration by the Forum and where it may be in a position to play a catalytic role.

Firstly, one area of concern is the access to education of indigenous peoples living in remote areas or else who have ways of life that are nomadic or semi-nomadic. Clearly such groups often have limited access to education and consequently education levels fall well below national averages. Some of the difficulties are well known. The lack of infrastructure, the costs of delivering educational services to isolated communities or the difficulties of recruiting appropriately qualified teachers. There are nonetheless positive examples and the Forum may be the appropriate space for drawing together these experiences so that they can serve as useful references for indigenous peoples and governments that are confronted by these challenges.

Secondly, the Forum could consider how education, especially primary and community level education, can fully reflect indigenous cultures and respond to indigenous needs. An essential factor in achieving the second millennium goal for indigenous peoples is that

education recognizes and respects indigenous culture. If educational programmes do not include indigenous peoples' culture, norms, and language, it is likely that indigenous children will continue having lower levels of education in comparison to non-indigenous children. This was a strong message that came from the OHCHR/UNESCO seminar on education and indigenous peoples.

There are however examples of schools being established that draw on indigenous cultures and traditions and base the teaching on indigenous knowledge and languages. Successful examples of such educational projects involve indigenous peoples in the planning, programming and implementation - the preparation of curricula, learning materials etc. Indigenous peoples must be able to see the value and benefits from sending their children to school, which is most likely to happen if the education is in line with indigenous peoples' culture and norms.

- The Office, therefore, would like to propose firstly that the Permanent Forum invites indigenous peoples, States and the relevant organizations of the UN system to share experiences of education including distance education for remote or nomadic and semi-nomadic indigenous peoples. The experiences would be a source of information that can be used by those responsible for educational delivery and who are confronted by the practical difficulties of bringing education to these communities.
- Secondly, the Office would like to propose that the Permanent Forum invites indigenous peoples, States and relevant organizations of the UN system to share experiences of indigenous-managed educational establishments at the primary level or community level based on indigenous cultures and traditions as possible good practices.

Madam Chairperson, the OHCHR would like to underline the importance of education as a fundamental means of bringing indigenous peoples out of poverty and exclusion and protecting and transferring to future generations their cultures, values and languages.

Thank you.