

**Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 12-23 May 2003  
Agenda Item 4(b) – Economic and social development**



**Intervention by Dr William Jonas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, [www.humanrights.gov.au/social\\_justice/](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/)**

**15 May 2003**

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Thank you Mr Chair.

I speak to day in my capacity as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner of Australia's national human rights institution. The Social Justice Commissioner has the responsibility of being the independent monitoring agency of the Australian government's performance on recognizing and protecting Indigenous human rights. Today I wanted to make some brief comments on the programmes and policies of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Mr Chair, in fulfilling my role of reporting annually to Australia's federal Parliament on the status of enjoyment of human rights by Indigenous peoples, I have found useful guidance in materials prepared by the UNDP. In particular, I would commend to the Permanent Forum and to indigenous organizations here the UNDP's 2000 Human Development Report on human rights and development, which provides a detailed analysis of mechanisms for ensuring greater accountability for human rights standards; as well as the draft guidelines on poverty eradication jointly prepared by the UNDP and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights late last year.

Both of these documents provide extensive guidance in relation to identifying development goals and objectives within the context of international human rights standards to progressively realize the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. My office has applied the detailed analysis in these documents to evaluate the adequacy of the Australian government's approach to addressing Indigenous disadvantage, through the appropriate targeting of measures to address Indigenous inequality.

In light of the fact that most Indigenous peoples around the world experience extreme marginalisation, inequality and poverty, these documents are of enormous value and relevance to Indigenous peoples. However, they provide no recognition of the distinct status of Indigenous peoples or consideration of issues relating to recognizing and protecting our distinct cultural characteristics.

Because of this, and due to the extent of inequality and marginalisation that we face no matter where we live, it is vital that the UNDP further development its work in this area and provide specific consideration to the situation of Indigenous peoples.

Let me provide you with just one example of why this is so necessary. In the *Human Development Report 2002*, Australia is rated among the top five countries in the world in

the Human Development Index. The average of life expectancy at birth of Australians exceeds the UNDP's average for countries in the High Human Development category.

Recent statistics of Indigenous life expectancy in Australia, however, reveal that:

- Indigenous life expectancy in Australia is 24 years less than for non-Indigenous Australians - a rate which incidentally is equivalent to the life expectancy of non-Indigenous Australians in the year 1900;
- This life expectancy rate for Indigenous Australians has actually declined in the past five years; and
- In the Northern Territory of Australia, average life expectancy at birth of Indigenous people is actually lower than the UNDP's country average for countries in the low Human Development category.

This is the most profound statistic of the inequality experienced by Indigenous Australians, and yet such inequality and the necessity to take urgent steps to address it, is not readily apparent in the UNDP's work.

Clearly, this issue is relevant to the discussion of data disaggregation held earlier this week in this Forum and I would urge the Permanent Forum to consider this issue in its ongoing consideration of that issue. I would also note that the UNDP Human Development Index seeks to identify the existence of inequality within societies through the disaggregation of data in regards to gender. There is a pressing need for inequality experienced by Indigenous peoples to be similarly reflected.

This is, however, more than an issue of data collection and disaggregation. It goes to the core of the meaning of development. Accordingly, I make the following suggestions as to how the UNDP might usefully extend its consideration of these issues to the situation of Indigenous peoples and to engage the expertise of the members of the Permanent Forum. I recommend that the Permanent Forum:

- Acknowledge the excellent work on poverty eradication and the integration of human rights and development standards by the UNDP to date and request the UNDP to further this work by specifically applying it to the situation of Indigenous peoples as peoples with a distinct status, a peoples who suffer extreme marginalisation and as peoples whose very survival remains under threat;
- In accordance with the information provided by the UNDP to the Forum earlier this week that the 2004 Human Development Report will be on the theme of development and cultural diversity, to recommend that the UNDP include in that report specific consideration - as distinct, self-determining peoples - of the situation of Indigenous peoples and for the UNDP to invite members of the Permanent Forum to participate in the advisory groups that oversee the compilation of that report.

Thank you Mr Chair.